

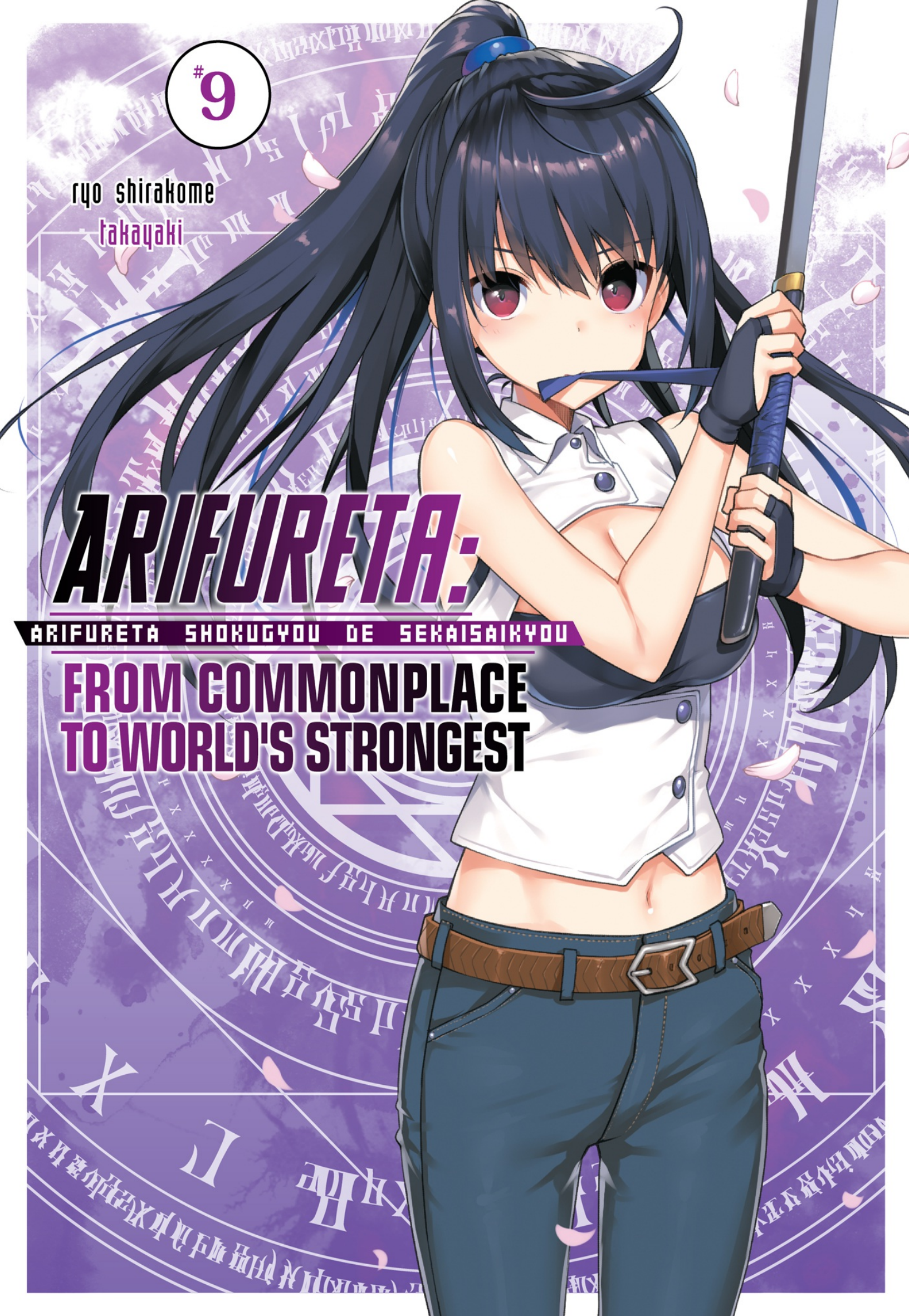
#9

ryo shirakome
takayaki

ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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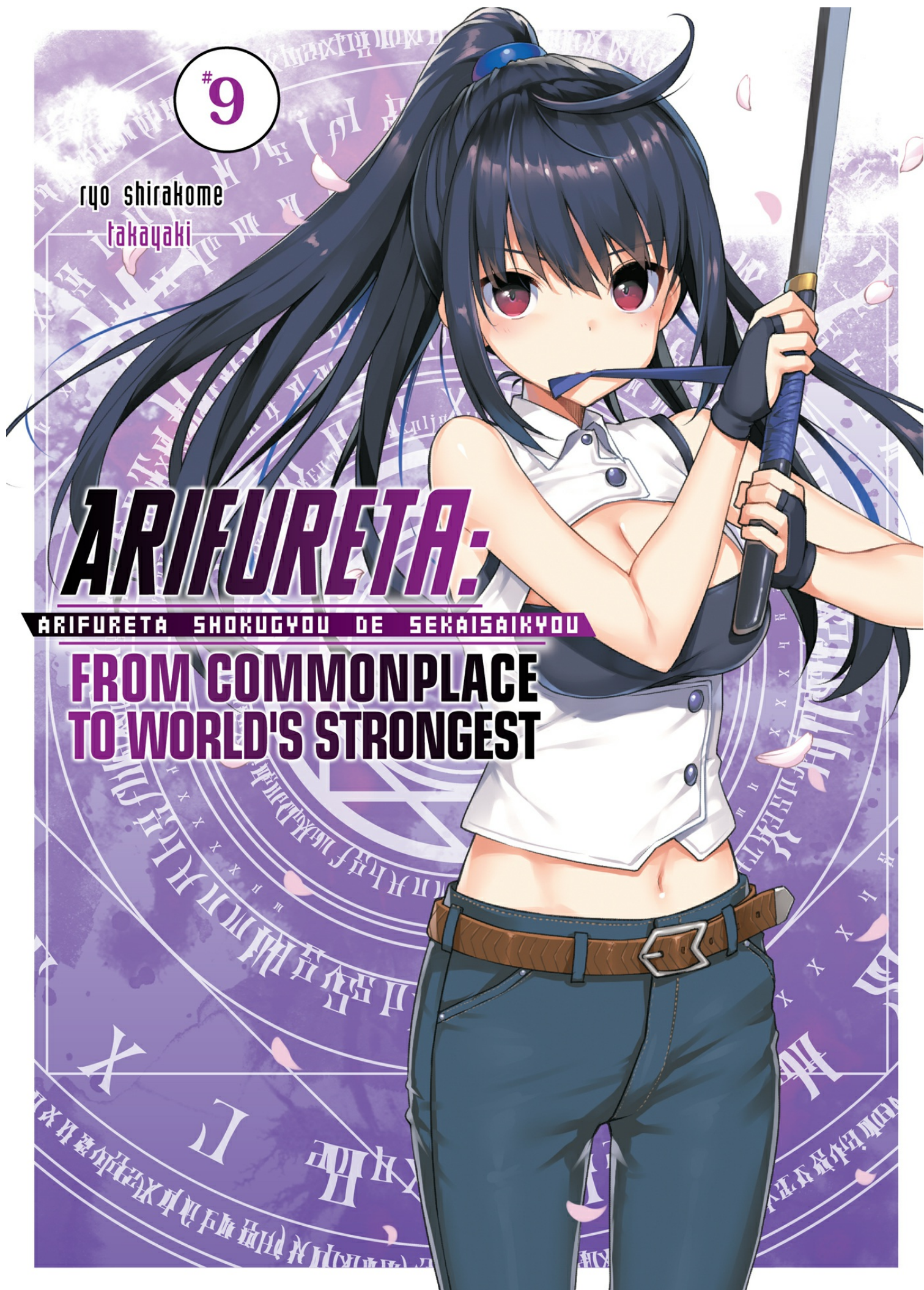
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ryo shirakome

takayaki



"UHM,
LET'S
TRY LEFT
NEXT."

HAJIME NAGUMO

"HAJIME
KUN?"

HADAI SHIRASAKI

SHIA



"I'LL BE GOING THEN."

"GO FOR IT. I'LL BE WAITING."

VS HER COPY

YABEGASHI SHIZUKU

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I: THE FINAL LABYRINTH

CHAPTER II: WHISPERS

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Prologue

I always thought it was unfair. That it was too good to be true. I mean, you were like a hero straight out of a fairy tale. Your dazzling crimson radiance was just too breathtaking. And you always appeared so solid and reliable.

No matter how hard I tried, you always found out my vulnerabilities, and you always knew how to reassure me. Your presence was like a gentle spring breeze. Like a tree providing shade from a hot summer day. Like the biting chill of a crisp winter morning. Like the wistfulness of a bright autumn dusk.

To me you were both bitter and sweet, a complicated enigma that words alone couldn't capture. All of the insecurities I'd hidden away beneath the armor of my practiced smile you exposed without a care in the world. You aggravated me to no end. I hated that side of you. *So please... I'm begging you. Don't—protect me anymore.*

Chapter I: The Final Labyrinth

A large object floated high above the clouds. It was Tortus' one and only flying vehicle—the airship Fernir. Sunlight glinted off its polished hull as it cut through the sky. Clouds spread out below it in all directions, forming a sea that stretched toward the horizon. They lacked the fluffy white quality of most clouds and instead seemed like a flat sheet of burnished bronze. Because of that, Fernir gave off the illusion that it was gliding through an actual sea like a massive manta ray.

“Wow. I can't see the ground at all. It's like how the Haltina Woods look from the sky.”

Shea's bunny ears twitched excitedly as she looked out of the bridge's round window. The clouds they were passing through certainly did resemble the mist that covered the Haltina Woods. The sight reminded Shea of her favorite place in the forest, the tree that served as her mother's—Mona's—grave. She thought back to the night she'd spent with Hajime there, where they'd gazed up at the moonlit fog and talked about their feelings. After many trials and tribulations, she'd finally been able to enter the kind of relationship she'd wanted to with him. Shea giggled bashfully to herself and her ears and tail started wagging back and forth.

“Mmm... It's always cloudy over the Schnee Snow Fields. And there's always a blizzard going. It's the coldest place on the continent,” Yue muttered, as she turned from her own window and gave Shea a faint smile.

The Schnee Snow Fields were a large tundra that covered the southeastern edge of the continent. They were bordered on the west by the Demon Empire of Garland, and on the north by the Haltina Woods. Supposedly they were covered by clouds twenty-four seven, and never saw the light of day. Worse, the snowfields were covered by a perpetual blizzard. Everything was coated in layers of snow and ice, and the temperature never rose above a few dozen degrees below freezing. Its hellish climate was the most extreme on all of

Tortus.

“There’s no way that weather’s natural.” Hajime muttered as he lounged on a sofa. His Demon Eye was glowing bluish-white through his eyepatch. Though he looked like he was relaxing, he was in fact constantly monitoring the external cameras installed on various places on the Fernir through his eye.

“Both the blizzard and the clouds conspire to isolate the snowfields entirely from the rest of the world. I would assume this is the work of the Liberator who constructed this labyrinth.” Tio muttered in admiration.

As she’d said, the Schnee Snow Fields were entirely cut off from the rest of the world. What was even more impressive was that the blizzard never pushed past its boundaries into demon territory in the west or the Haltina Woods in the north. Some invisible barrier kept the weather confined to a set area. While Tortus may have been a fantasy world, Hajime highly doubted weather like that was a natural phenomenon. Kaori, who was hovering around Hajime, suddenly looked out the window and said, “Umm... there’s supposed to be this huge crevasse in the snowfields right? And the final labyrinth’s supposed to be at its bottom?”

“Yeah. The labyrinth of snow and ice—The Frost Caverns.”

“The reason most people think there’s a labyrinth down there is because the weather’s clearly unnatural, and not a single person has returned from there alive, right?”

“Basically. But we know for sure it’s down there, Kaori. Since Miledi told us directly. We got our information from one of the Liberators directly, so there’s no doubt it’s solid.”

Oh, I forgot about that! Kaori nodded in understanding. At the same time, she felt they were kind of cheating by flying right through the harsh polar environment of the snowfields, which were likely part of the labyrinth’s trial.

“So how is it, Master? Is the compass working?”

Tio leaned over to get a better look at the compass in Hajime’s hand. In doing so, her voluptuous breasts dangled right in front of Hajime’s face. Hajime leaned back a little and nodded.

“Yeah, we’re good. I’ve gotta say though, this thing is amazing. It doesn’t just point to whatever you’re looking for, it also gives you this vague impression of how far the thing is, and what the place it’s at is like.”

Hajime held up the compass, which looked like an old-fashioned pocket watch. Lyutillis Haltina, the creator of the labyrinth within the Haltina Woods had granted it to the party as a reward for clearing the labyrinth. It was an artifact known as the Compass of Eternal Paths. And its ability was to show the wielder where what they desired lay.

Neither normal magic nor ancient magic was capable of achieving such a feat. The compass had been created using concept magic, the pinnacle of all magic on Tortus. According to the hologram Lyutillis had recorded, it could only be used by combining all seven types of ancient magic. On top of that, the wielder of concept magic needed an unbreakable will, or they’d be unable to rewrite the laws of reality with it. Long ago, when Miledi and the other Liberators had first discovered it, they’d only been able to create three kinds of concept magic spells, despite their best efforts.

Kaori sighed in wonder as she gazed at the compass and said, “It even told us where Earth is. Though it’s hard to describe how far it actually is...”

“It took a ton of mana just to find where it was too. I never thought a single spell could drain me of all my mana like that. Hell, I nearly fainted after that.”

Despite his bitter smile, there was a glimmer of joy in Hajime’s eyes. Back in the abyss, when he’d been on the verge of death, there had been just a single desire giving him the hope to push onward. Returning home. He’d been willing to throw everything else away for that goal. And now, that goal was finally in sight.

Everyone vividly remembered how Hajime had smiled after they’d first cleared Haltina’s labyrinth and learned how to return home. That smile had been a mixture of warmth and strength, a difficult to describe but highly memorable smile. One that had shone brighter than the sun.

Despite the hellscape outside, Fernir’s bridge was warm and safe. After a few minutes of staring at the clouds, Yue trotted back over to Hajime and sat down beside him. She looked warmly up at him, her expression full of love. Shea

followed suit and hopped over to the sofa as well. But instead of sitting down on Hajime's other side, she stopped in front of him. Fidgeting a little, she gave him a bashful, hesitant look.

"Come on, stop worrying so much about how close you should get or where you should sit. You're making me embarrassed just watching."

Hajime smiled awkwardly. For some reason, it was only after being acknowledged as Hajime's lover that Shea had started getting embarrassed about being excessively clingy. Even though she'd come on to him nonstop when he'd been rejecting her advances, now that he'd accepted her she was hesitating.

"Mmm... That's cute, Shea."

Yue flashed Shea a thumbs-up. Shea's bunny ears twitched and she said, "P-Please don't tease me like that. Ugh."

Shea blushed and hid her face with her ears. Tio put a hand on her chin and muttered thoughtfully, "Indeed, your cuteness is destructive, Shea. How cunning! You're almost as cunning as Kaori!" Her comment caused Kaori to look up in surprise. *Does Tio really think of me like that!?* Hajime sighed to himself, but then smiled gently. He tenderly held a hand out to Shea.

"Come on, stop standing there and sit down."

"O-Okay."

Blushing, Shea happily accepted Hajime's hand and sat down next to him. After a moment's hesitation, she steeled her resolve and scooted as close to him as possible.

"Mrr... I have to admit, that *is* cute..." Kaori groaned. Tio flashed Shea a grin and said, "So? I believe it's about time you gave us a report, Shea. I held my tongue thus far out of consideration, but I cannot wait any longer. Tell us all the juicy details!"

"What the heck are you talking about? Also, Tio-san, your panting and bloodshot eyes are creeping—Ahem, scaring me."

"Don't play dumb. I'm asking how your first night with Master went! Surely

something happened!”

“Huuuuuuuh!? I-I can’t talk about that. There’s no way! How could you even ask something like that, you perverted dragon!?”

“Don’t waste your breath complimenting me! I won’t let you change the topic. If you have even the least bit of pity for Kaori and me, who rarely even get a chance to sleep in the same bed as Master, then you’ll lay everything bare right now!”

Shea shrunk back as Tio bore down on her, panting. Before she could argue back, Kaori said, “Oh? Did you just call me pitiful, Tio? Is it just me or have you been badmouthing me a lot more recently? Have I done something to make you mad!?”

Kaori grabbed Tio’s sash and started pulling.

“Calm yourself, Kaori. You’ve done nothing wrong. This is simply my way of bonding with you. I feel that since we two are the only ones being left out, we should get along.”

“That just makes me feel worse!”

Tio ignored Kaori’s protests and ignored the fact that her sash was about to come off, and continued pressing Shea.

“Now come, tell me everything! I need to know about Master’s fetishes, his preferences, and his desires! Spare no detail! You who has surpassed me in life experiences must teach me what I lack!”

“I’m not telling!”

“Impossible... are Master’s fetishes so extreme that you shudder to even—”

“Don’t put him together with you, Tio-san! Hajime-san’s not a pervert! He’s normal... but also... amazing. No matter how many times I—”

Shea’s ears burned bright red. It was obvious from her expression what she was recalling. Apparently, she’d had quite a steamy final night in Verbergen. Incidentally, Tio, Kaori, and a whole host of others had tried to peek into Hajime’s room, but Yue had chased them all away with her Draconic Thunder. A certain elf princess had been more persistent than the others, and so had been

rewarded with an even more severe beating than the others. She was currently recuperating in her house, ecstatically nursing her injuries.

Hajime flicked Tio's forehead with his prosthetic fingers, causing her to somersault gracefully through the air. The sound of her crashing into the wall brought Shea back to her senses. Realizing what she'd just accidentally let slip, Shea curled up in embarrassment and once again covered her face with her ears.

"Mmm... I taught Hajime all there is to know. He's a true berserker in bed."

"Yue, could you stop talking for a second?"

Hajime comfortingly patted Shea's head with one hand while he pinched Yue's cheeks with the other. Kaori watched on with jealousy while Tio lay on the ground writhing in pleasure.

"W-We finally made it to the final labyrinth! I want to hurry up and get through it so we can go see Myu-chan again!"

Shea hurriedly changed the subject in an attempt to clear the awkward atmosphere. Chuckling at her desperation, Hajime responded, "Yeah. I hope she's doing well..."

By some strange twist of fate, Hajime had ended up taking care of a young dragon girl for a while. Her existence had been a huge part of why Hajime had started to change. In fact, he'd promised her that he'd take her back to Earth someday. The same promise he'd made to Yue back during the start of their journey. Hajime looked off toward the west, where Myu waited a continent away. Shea smiled and said, "I'm sure she is. Besides, she takes after you, Hajime-san. If we don't show up to see her again, she'll definitely go on a journey to find us instead."

You're not wrong there. Hajime turned to Shea and nodded.

"We'll need to make some time to see Cam and the others too."

"Hajime-san... Ehehe, thank you!"

In truth, Hajime had asked Cam and the other Haulia if they'd want to go to Earth with him before he'd left Verbergen. But their answer had been a

definitive no. Hajime had expected that answer from the start though. After all, they'd resolved to fight against the empire. They'd decided to win their right to survive in this world with their own two hands. To fight back against the society that oppressed them. For the reborn Haulia tribe, earning their rights was both a matter of pride and their *raison d'être*.

Though he'd known all that, Hajime had still been a little disappointed that Shea would have to leave her family behind. However, Cam had just smiled at Hajime and said, "As long as you make Shea happy, that's enough for me, Boss." There hadn't been an iota of regret in that smile. Truly, all he'd cared about was his daughter's happiness. Hajime, of course, knew that it was possible for him to travel freely between Tortus and Earth while avoiding the gods' interference. However, it would be a difficult feat, especially when he knew so little about conception magic to begin with. While he fully intended to make interworld travel possible at some point, he had no idea how long it might take. Once they went to Earth, he couldn't say for certain how much time it would be before Shea saw her family again. Which was why he wanted to give Shea at least a day to spend with her family before they made the jump.

Shea, of course, realized all that, and she beamed at Hajime before taking his hand.

"But you know, Hajime-san. I've already said my farewells to Dad and the others. I'm happy you're worried about me, but you really don't have to be. I'm sure Dad would want that too."

"You sure?"

"Yep! Fufu, I realized this after we first met Myu-chan, but you're really nice to your family, Hajime-san."

Shea flashed Hajime a teasing smile and snickered. Yue also flashed Hajime a playful grin and grabbed onto his arm.

"Mmm... Hajime really spoils his family. You have to be careful, or you'll drown in his kindness."

"Ahaha. You're right, if I let myself take advantage of Hajime-kun too much I won't be able to do anything on my own."

I can't believe even Kaori's saying that. Hajime thought with a frown. He didn't really want to be seen as some kind of NEET-enabler. Just then, the bridge's sliding door opened, and Kouki, Ryutarou, Suzu, and Shizuku walked into the room. The four of them were so used to seeing Hajime cuddling with Yue and Shea that they didn't even bother to comment. However, one of the three still raised an eyebrow in disapproval. Hajime ignored him and took the group's entrance as an opportunity to change the subject.

"You guys sure were at it for a long time. How is it? Did you get used to your artifacts' new abilities?"

Kouki and the others had been on the deck familiarizing themselves with the new powers Hajime had enchanted their artifacts with. Shizuku heaved a tired sigh and replied, "We did, Nagumo-kun. Thanks to—Wait, why's she lying on the floor and grinning like a creep?"

Shizuku leaped back when she spotted Tio panting on the floor. Considering Tio's current appearance. Shizuku's surprise was understandable. Kaori's pulling had loosened Tio's sash, and her kimono was on the verge of slipping off. On a normal person, that level of undress would have looked sexy, but everyone knew how much of a pervert Tio was, which was why Shizuku was so freaked out.

"You can ignore the trash lying on the floor. Have a seat."

Tio squirmed in pleasure. Kouki and the others gave her a wide berth as they walked over to the sofa.

"Anyway, how were they? Find anything wrong with the upgrades?"

Hajime continued his conversation as though nothing had happened. *I've seen this same exchange a bunch of times already, but I can never get used to it.* Kouki thought to himself, nonplussed. He shot the dragon lying on the floor a few covert glances before replying.

"Nah, they were fine. Honestly, I'm surprised. I can channel magic through my sword way easier now. It's stronger too, and all the new abilities look useful."

Kouki frowned as he said that, unhappy that he'd gotten stronger without any effort, and that the source of his newfound strength was Hajime. Ryutarou

either didn't notice or didn't care about his friend's plight and added cheerfully, "Man, this stuff is awesome! It felt weird stepping on air at first, but this is going to come in handy for sure. And my gauntlets are twice as strong as before. I can't wait to test them out in a real fight!"

On top of upgrading their artifacts, Hajime had also given Kouki and the others new artifacts to boost their abilities. Among those artifacts were boots which had been enchanted with Aerodynamic to let them stand on air. Ryutarou punched his gauntlets together excitedly, like a child eager to test out a new toy. Shockwaves spread out from the point of impact, a display of one of the new powers Hajime had endowed them with. Suzu, who was sitting next to him, grimaced as the shockwaves passed through her and ruffled her twintails. Once the shockwaves subsided she nodded and said, "Unlike everyone else, my artifact's a completely new one so I was worried I might not be able to use it right, but it was way easier to get the hang of than I thought! Now... I'll be able to fight too. I won't have to settle for just protecting everyone. Thanks, Nagumo-kun!"

Suzu flashed Hajime a carefree yet determined smile. It was her persistence that had convinced Hajime to let Kouki and his group continue to tag along on his journey.

Even if it meant saying farewell for good, Suzu wanted to meet once more with her best friend, Nakamura Eri. In order to make that dream a reality, she needed power. Which was why she'd begged Hajime to give her one more chance and let her take a crack at another labyrinth with him. Her unshakable resolve might have been what had convinced Hajime to give her new weapons so that she could fight. As a Barrier Master, her job gave her unparalleled defensive abilities, but her base offensive skills left much to be desired.

"There was nothing wrong with my artifact either. In fact, it's been upgraded so much I think I might have too many options in combat. I guess I'll just have to build up more experience so I know what to use when."

Shizuku looked down at her beloved black katana with a slightly stiff expression. She was almost afraid of how much Hajime had powered it up.

"Perfect. I mostly added those upgrades as a way to get practice with

evolution magic, but it's good to know you guys like them. Though there's still some things about Amanogawa's sword that I'm not happy with..."

"Huh? W-Wait up, Nagumo! Are you saying my sword's defective!?"

Did he ask how the upgrades were because he wasn't sure they'd all actually work!? Kouki thought, horrified. Hajime was like an engineer who, upon finding an extra screw after completing a project, would just shrug his shoulders and go "Oh well." Hajime smiled and shook his head.

"Don't worry, that's not what I meant. It's just your holy sword is a little special. The blade's enchantments are all extremely precise and perfectly balanced."

"Uhh, so what's that supposed to mean exactly?"

"It means your sword's already been enhanced as much as feasibly possible. If I make too many adjustments to the core, I might end up making it weaker instead of stronger. Which is why I just did some general maintenance and added a few external upgrades to the surface. To be honest, you couldn't call what I did a real remodel."

In essence, what Hajime was saying was that the ancient sword had gotten a little rusty after all these years, and all he'd done was polish the rust off. Upon hearing that the sword was beyond even Hajime's abilities to improve, everyone's eyes widened in surprise. Kouki scrutinized his weapon, wondering what exactly it was made of.

"Anyway, if you guys can master those weapons then you should be able to hold your own even in demon territory. Of course you've gotta survive the labyrinth first... good luck with that."

Though Hajime's words sounded cold, he had just given Kouki and the rest a huge power boost. They were already indebted to him, so they could hardly ask to be coddled any further.

It really does feel like Nagumo-kun's changed a little... Shizuku thought to herself. While Hajime's speech and actions hadn't changed much since conquering Haltina's labyrinth, Shizuku felt as though there was an underlying kindness behind them now. Suzu felt the same way, and in fact, was beginning

to think that Hajime might actually just be a tsundere. However, she knew how he'd react if she said that so she kept her mouth shut.

Suddenly, Hajime looked down at the compass. A second later, he turned to the window and narrowed his eyes. He was no longer lounging on the sofa, but rather sitting with his back straight.

"We've reached the crevasse. It's time to descend."

Fernir plummeted into the clouds, and the party felt a sensation of weightlessness wash over them. Everyone turned to the window as they descended, ignoring the butterflies they were getting in their stomachs. Outside was a world of dark grey. No sunlight made its way through the thick clouds, but occasional bolts of lightning briefly illuminated them. After a few seconds of descent, Fernir shuddered. It seemed one of the lightning bolts had struck the airship.

"Kyaa!?" Suzu screamed and shrunk back. Kouki and the other stiffened nervously as well.

"Relax, guys. Fernir isn't like an airplane from Earth. A little turbulence won't be enough to bring it down." A fierce wind blew around the airship and pellets of hail struck it from all sides. From within the bridge, it sounded like someone was firing a machine gun. Peals of thunder interrupted the staccato barrage, with some occasionally striking the ship. Had Fernir operated on normal aerodynamic principles, it would have been in serious danger of falling. But as Hajime had said, his airship was made of sterner stuff. A few bolts of thunder or a hail of ice wasn't enough to even scratch the hull.

"I know it's gravity magic, but this feels like a sci-fi spaceship..."

"Tell me about it."

Ryutarou watched in awe as Fernir weathered the storm with ease. Kouki shot Hajime a covert glance, saw the confidence on his face, then turned back to Ryutarou and nodded. It took only a few seconds to pass through the storm clouds. Once they were through, the snowfields spread out below them.

"Whoa. Hajime-san, Hajime-san, look outside!"

"Calm down, Shea. I get you're excited, but can you stop flapping your ears

around? You keep poking me in the eye.”

A fierce blizzard raged on outside. The temperature was so low that frost gathered on the windows in seconds. This was the first time Shea had ever seen snow, so she was unduly excited. She clung to Hajime’s arm and pointed at the window, her ears and tail flopping back and forth. Each time her ears made a full circuit, they bopped Hajime in the eye.

“Oho, so this is the coldest place on Tortus is like. It certainly lives up to its name. I must say, I am not fond of the cold.”

Tio frowned as she gazed down at the snowscape below. Knowing her masochistic tendencies, she’d probably turn her dislike of the cold into pleasure somehow. *If she starts getting too annoying maybe I should strip her naked and throw her out into the cold...* Hajime thought, and shot Tio a quick glance. Guessing his intentions, Tio shivered in pleasure. *What a wonderful idea, Master.* Hajime ignored her and held up the pendant he was wearing. It was a simple octagonal, clear-blue crystal attached to a plain chain. This was a new climate modulating artifact he’d created, the Airzone.

“I’m not going to make the same mistake I did at Gruen. Make sure you guys don’t lose the artifacts I handed out to you. Unless you want to have a miserable time in the labyrinth.”

Yue and the others took out their own identical pendants.

“Mmm... Wonderful craftsmanship as always, Hajime.”

“Yeah, I love how it looks like a snowflake!”

“This is the third gift you’ve given me, Hajime-kun... Ehehe.”

While it may have been necessary equipment, it was also a gift from the man they loved. And unlike the relatively plain pendant Hajime had made for himself, the ones he’d made for the girls all had elaborate snowflake designs. They glimmered enchantingly in the bridge’s artificial light. Yue, Shea, and Kaori smiled as they looked down at their pendants. However, a pained voice interrupted their admiration.

“Master, may I ask why only mine is a tiny snowman? I suppose I cannot deny that it looks cute, however... I would have liked a complex and fanciful design as

well...”

Tio lifted her pendant up to get a better look at it. The crystal on her chain was shaped like a smiling snowman. It looked as though it was ready to come to life and burst into laughter at any moment. Tio glanced wistfully back and forth between her own pendant and those belonging to Yue and the others. Seeing her longing, Hajime said, “I know.”

“Kn-Know what?”

To Tio’s surprise, Hajime’s expression was serious. Her voice wavered a little as she replied. With a piercing glare, Hajime declared, “I know that Super Tio-san is sleeping somewhere within you!”

“!?”

Shock rippled across the bridge, leaving everyone speechless. Super Tio-san referred to the strange personality Tio had displayed back in the labyrinth when everyone’s emotions had been reversed. She’d been so reliable she’d been scary, and so cool she’d creeped everyone out. She’d been, of all things, a normal Tio Clarence!

“I thought it had just been a rumor, but Shea and Kaori told me all about how scary it was after we cleared the labyrinth. They wouldn’t lie... so it means a serious version of you really exists, Tio.”

“Master. My apologies for interrupting you in the midst of such a serious revelation, but don’t you think that’s rather rude? You’re actually hurting my feelings here.”

Tio shot a sulky look at Shea and Kaori. It was rare to see her actually feeling down. The two girls hastily replied, “D-Don’t blame us! You really were scary back then! When you were protecting me you looked so regal and said all that cool stuff... It started making me feel weird!”

“What’s so strange about that!? What reason could there possibly be to be scared!?”

“Of course I’d be scared! This is you we’re talking about, Tio-san! Just thinking about how cool and unflappable you were back then makes me—Ulp.”

“Now hold on just a moment, Sheaaaa! Why does the thought of me make you nauseous!? You’re making me cry! If you keep insulting me like this I really will start sobbing!”

The fact that Tio’s cheeks were still reddening despite how supposedly hurtful Shea’s words were proved that this dragon was beyond help. However, Hajime wasn’t willing to give up on Super Tio-san that easily. He pointed to the snowman pendant and said, “I want to see the Super Tio-san slumbering deep inside you. So make sure you bring it out while we’re in the frost caverns. If you do, I’ll reward you by making you a pendant of whatever design you want.”

“H-How cruel, Master... Doesn’t that mean you’ll never give me a proper gift my whole life!? That’s just too cruel! I may enjoy being punished, but I abhor being left out!”

“Oi, shitty dragon. Stop talking like that version of you’s dead forever. Don’t assume your horrible fetishes are incurable.”

Hajime sighed as he watched Tio cling to him with tears in her eyes. He’d thought this was his best chance to bring out normal Tio. Suzu and Shizuku exchanged glances as they watched Hajime bully Tio.

“Hey, Shizushizu. Is it just me, or did he not even try for ours? Like mine’s just a rock. Even a snowman’s better than that.”

“Don’t say it, Suzu. The difference in how he treats us hurts too much to think about.”

Shizuku looked glumly down at her pendant. The crystal on its chain looked like the kind of plain rock one might pick up from a riverbed. In truth, it was just a plain rock Hajime had enchanted to protect against the cold. Shizuku wasn’t exactly expecting a lavish present from Hajime or anything, but she was still a little disappointed that this was all she got.

“Is it really that big a deal? As long as it keeps me warm, I don’t care what my pendant looks like.”

“Ryutarou. I don’t think that’s why they’re sad about it.”

Suzu glared at Ryutarou as if to say “Yeah, it’s exactly what Kouki said!” Ryutarou, ever insensitive about girls’ feelings, awkwardly averted his gaze. He

didn't want to touch this issue with a ten-foot pole.

As the group was bickering over their pendants, Fernir descended far enough that they could make out a large crevasse through the ceaseless blizzard. The crevasse turned out to be a series of fissures that left a spiderweb of cracks through otherwise unblemished earth. This was the Ice Gorge that led to the frost caverns. Supposedly, the entrance to the labyrinth lay somewhere in that maze of fissures. Hajime turned Fernir to match the direction the compass pointed. Normally, any aspiring party of conquerors would have needed to navigate the deadly maze of fissures to find the entrance. All while braving the harsh cold and relentless blizzard. Hajime could see why people believed the region contained a labyrinth. After continuing forward for a while, they reached the gorge's endpoint. However, they still hadn't found the entrance to the frost caverns. Hajime cocked his head to the side.

"Huh? Does the gorge stop here? But the compass says we've got a ways to go still..."

"Hajime, look."

Yue pointed to the crystal in the middle of the bridge that displayed what the external cameras were seeing. From the looks of it, the crevasse had narrowed considerably, but not vanished completely. After magnifying the display a few times, Hajime spotted something that looked like a tunnel at the very end of the gorge. Though he couldn't see much further, it looked like the tunnel continued deeper in the direction they were traveling. Whatever it led to was hidden from above by a thick pile of snow and ice.

"Guess our only choice is to head down and continue on foot. According to the compass, it's only a kilometer to the caverns, so it shouldn't be a long walk."

"We're finally going outside!? This is my first time seeing snow! I wonder what it feels like? Does it have a smell? My fingers won't freeze if I touch it, will they?"

Shea's ears and tail swished back and forth in excitement. She was clearly looking forward to this a great deal. She ran over to the window and pressed her face to it, like an excited child looking out of a train window. Hajime scratched his head awkwardly and turned away from her. It was obvious from

his outstretched hand that he'd been about to instinctively hug Shea and that he'd had to look away to stop himself. Shea had been just as childishly excited when they'd reached the ocean a while back, but Hajime saw her in a very different light now than he had back then. After formally accepting Shea as his lover, Hajime had found himself inexplicably captivated by Shea's innocent curiosity and excitement.

"Fufu..."

Yue chuckled as she watched Hajime's conflicted reaction. Hajime cleared his throat awkwardly and tried to make it seem as though he was focused on guiding Fernir toward the crevasse.

"I want to land inside the crevasse... but I guess that's not happening. It's too narrow. I'll bring us down next to it."

Talking to no one in particular, Hajime manipulated Fernir to land on the crevasse's cliff. Since Fernir didn't manipulate air pressure to fly, there was no gust of wind to whip up the snow around their landing point. In fact, Fernir touched down in complete silence. Hajime opened the ship's hatch, and a frigid gust of wind blew into the bridge.

"Fwah!? That's cold!"

"This is some weather... Achoo!"

Suzu shivered and wrapped her arms around herself while Shizuku sneezed. Neither of them had activated their Airzones because they'd wanted to experience just how cold it was first. Hajime and the others hadn't either, and they all shivered violently for a few seconds before turning on their artifacts.

A fierce blizzard greeted the group the moment they stepped outside. A film of white snow soon coated everyone's faces. Hajime's Airzones only regulated the temperature around their wearer; they didn't create any kind of physical barrier. So in order to keep out the snow, everyone had to put up the hoods of the coats they were wearing.

"Wow, so this is snow! Ahahaha, it's all soft and fluffy!"

Shea, however, didn't even bother to button up her coat, let alone put on her hood. She scampered excitedly through the snow, heedless of the blizzard and

its gale-force winds. She stamped her feet on the snow, squatted down and picked handfuls of it up, and generally enjoyed her first encounter with the powdery substance.

“Oi, Shea. We’re leaving. Stop messing around and—”

“I’ve gotta try jumping into it!”

“Listen to me...”

Shea was so excited that Hajime’s words didn’t even register to her. She let out a spirited yell and dove headfirst into a pile of snow. As she left her mark on the virgin snow she shouted, “From today onward, I’m no longer a forest bunny but a snow bunnyyyyyyyy!”

Her whole body disappeared into the pile of snow, leaving a Shea-sized hole where she’d landed. It seemed she’d dove straight into the crevasse. Snow had piled up around it so it had looked like part of the ground, but it wasn’t actually. A second later, Hajime walked over to the edge and looked down.

“And so, the foolish bunny girl was never heard from again...” He muttered, sounding like he was narrating an RPG ‘game over’ message.

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on a second! How can you be so calm, Nagumo-kun!? What if Shea died down there!?”

“Eeeek Sheasheaaaaaa!”

Shizuku and Suzu looked down, their faces pale. Kouki and Ryutarou, on the other hand, were too stunned to even react.

“There’s no way Shea’d kick the bucket from a small fall like that. Come on, we need to get down there too.”

Hajime waved his hand as if it was no big deal and stored Fernir inside his Treasure Trove. Then, he casually stepped off the edge and fell down himself. Though the crevasse was easily 600 meters deep, he didn’t even hesitate.

“Wha!?” Kouki and Ryutarou exclaimed, their eyes wide. Yue followed after him, also stepping off the edge without hesitation. A desolate gust of wind blew past the remaining party members as they watched the two of them descend into the darkness.

“Ah, wait for me, you two!”

Kaori was the next to jump. She, too, had no hesitation. As if she was just jumping into a pool. Had she been back on Earth before amassing all her new powers, the fall would most certainly have killed her.

Technically, Kouki and the others were equipped with everything they needed to make the descent just as casually. The boots Hajime had given them let them walk on air, and they could, of course, use wind magic to slow their descent as well. That being said, their common sense, their instincts, were screaming at them that jumping off a cliff was a terrible idea. Suzu took one look down the cliff, then backed up. There were tears in her eyes, and she looked as though she had her back to a cliff.

“If you’re hesitating over such a simple task, how will you survive the labyrinth’s challenges? The trials you are about to face will be far more terrifying than a simple jump off a cliff. You can’t let yourselves falter here. Now pluck up your courage and jump.”

Unable to ignore Suzu's plight, Tio walked over and gave her a pat on the back. A rather forceful one at that. Suzu quickly braced her legs to stop Tio from pushing her all the way over the edge. She looked like a terrified skydiver having second thoughts. Probably because she hadn't been given a parachute.

“W-Wait! I’ll go, I promise! I can do it, don’t worry! So please just let me get myself ready first!”

“From the looks of it, it will take you all day to get ready.”

Suzu's struggles were in vain, and Tio easily lifted her up.

“Fear not. Even if you end up splatting on the ground, we should be able to find some way to salvage your soul. So don’t worry and get going!”

[illegible]

Taniguchi Suzu, seventeen years old. Upon arriving in another world, was thrown off a cliff. Literally.

Her screams grew steadily fainter, like the last flickering light of a dying flame, until finally, they vanished. Kouki and the others paled as Tio then turned toward them. Her sadistic smile made it obvious what was coming next. They were about to be thrown off too.

“Y-Yaegashi Shizuku, jumping off!”

Unwilling to suffer the humiliation of being thrown off, Shizuku elected to jump on her own. She fell headfirst, executing a perfect swan dive.

“I-I’m going too! I believe I can flyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“Fuck, guess I have to do it too!”

Ryutarou and Kouki followed suit. Though with considerably less grace and a good deal more desperation.

“Good. It’s nice to see youngsters with such energy.”

Tio nodded and leaped off the cliff herself. It was rare to see her act so pushy. Whether or not she was venting her frustrations over the Super Tio incident, only she knew.

“I-I’m not crying! I-I shwear, I’m not crying!”

Suzu’s wails echoed throughout the crevasse. Trembling, she shook her head and valiantly held back the tears threatening to pool in her eyes. It wasn’t the terror of the fall that had brought her to tears, but rather the damp patch spreading through her pants right now. Of course, the cause of that damp patch was something she could never reveal. Normally either Kouki, Ryutarou, or Shizuku would have consoled her, but right now the three of them were still recovering from the shock of their own fall. And so, it fell to Kaori to do the consoling. Unfortunately—

“Suzu-chan. Don’t worry, there’s nothing to be scared of. Oh, yes, do you want some candy?”

Kaori’s method of consoling someone was very similar to how an old lady would dote on her pet. The last thing Suzu wanted was to be treated like a small animal. Though she took the candy from Kaori, she still glared unhappily at her.

“E-Err, was the descent truly so terrifying?”

Tio asked guiltily. Seeing how traumatized Suzu was, she felt a little bad about what she'd done. Hajime gave Tio a pensive look and muttered, "Now that's rare. I never see you go sadistic, Tio. Did that side of you only awaken because you're dealing with Taniguchi? If we use Taniguchi as a sacrifice, can we bring out enough of your sadistic side that it cancels out your masochistic side, leaving behind only Super Tio?"

"Nagumo-kun!?"

"Master!?"

"Did you just call me a sacrifice!? You did, didn't you!?" Suzu screamed, while Tio pleaded, "Please, Master, can we forget about that subject already!?"

A second later the party heard a faint voice. "Hmm, I heard a voice from the other side of this wall." A second later, there was a loud yell and a series of rhythmic thuds came from the other side of the frozen wall. Each thud caused more cracks to appear in the ice. Finally, the wall blew apart, and Shea appeared from the opening. Drucken was perched casually on her shoulder.

"Man, what a cunning trap. I totally fell for it. Who would have thought the snow would conspire to take advantage of my childish innocence and—Bweh!?"

Shea wiped an imaginary bead of sweat off her brow to hide her embarrassment at falling through the snow. Before she could finish her sentence though, Hajime smacked her on the head.

"Moron. We might not be inside the labyrinth yet, but it's still dangerous here. Don't let your guard down."

"Awawah, sorry. I got carried away."

Shea's shoulders and bunny ears drooped. Hajime cleared his throat with a cough and said awkwardly, "Well, it's reassuring to see that worthless part of you is still going strong, I guess."

He walked over and started stroking Shea's ears. Yue seemed to have been thinking the same thing since she said, "Yeah... I was starting to miss the useless Shea."

She also strode over and started petting Shea.

“C-Cut it out you two! You’re making it sound like you want me to be useless!”

Shea fidgeted awkwardly. Despite her complaints, she seemed rather glad at the attention she was getting. Everyone watching could easily tell she was actually happy. In fact, it looked more like Hajime and Yue were flirting with Shea than actually admonishing her. This was the first time Yue or Hajime were flirting with someone other than each other. Meanwhile, Suzu had just suffered a terrifying fall, fallen into despair, and was now being abandoned.

“Things are getting so steamy over there I think the snow might melt. Good for you, Sheashea. Fucking lovebirds.”

“S-Suzu!? Did you just curse!? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you curse in your life!”

The cruel treatment Suzu had suffered had finally caused her to snap. Shizuku quickly snapped back to her senses and started doing everything she could to cheer Suzu up before the party’s barrier master was lost to the darkness forever. Including offering her candy.

“Looks like it’s... this way. Quit fooling around you guys, it’s time to go.”

“Like you’re one to talk!” Shizuku screamed, but Hajime ignored her and walked forward, using the compass as his guide. After a few minutes of walking, the party arrived at a fork where three different tunnels split off. Hajime’s compass pointed toward the rightmost tunnel. As they headed toward the tunnel Kouki slapped his cheeks and said, “He’s right, this isn’t the time to be messing around. Ryutarou, Shizuku, Suzu, let’s do this.”

“You got it. Suzu, cheer up already.”

“Ugh, I know, I know.”

“You okay, Suzu? Want another candy?”

“I’m sick and tired of candy.”

At Kouki’s urging, Ryutarou and the others walked into the dark, icy tunnel. The tunnel had been formed when snow piled up around the frozen walls of the crevasse. That caused strong winds to blow continuously through it, buffeting

the party. Since cold air descended while warm air rose, the bottom of the crevasse was even colder than the surface of the snowfields. Factoring in wind chill, it was likely close to -40° F or -50° F in the tunnel. Were it not for the party's Airzones, no amount of thick clothing would have been able to save them from these frigid temperatures. Thankfully, this crevasse didn't disperse mana the way the Reisen Gorge did. That being said, no amount of fire magic would have been able to fend off this weather for long. Plus, trying to use magic to stay warm would have just drained everyone's mana. Hajime led the party, walking cautiously down the tunnel. Naturally, the tunnel wasn't maintained. Natural rock formations and half-buried pillars of ice obstructed the path at regular intervals, and the route snaked around while also varying in elevation. The party, at times, clambered over obstructions, at other times detoured around them, and at yet other times destroyed them outright.

"Hm? Is something here?"

Shea's ears perked up. A second later, Hajime turned to the right. The right-hand side of the crevasse was filled with a wall of ice pillars jutting out like spears. And it seemed there was something hiding inside.

"Squeak."

"Waaah, it's so cute!"

That something turned out to be a baby rabbit. Shizuku let out an involuntary squeal when she spotted it. Everyone turned to her with a knowing grin.

"A-Ahem. Is that a monster? I never realized there were monsters out there who tried to lure in victims using a cute appearance."

"Shizuku-chan, I don't think you're fooling anyone."

"Shizushizu, you know your ears are red, right?"

While the girls were talking, the bunny slowly hopped toward the party. Upon closer inspection, it became clear this was no normal rabbit. Its fur was pure silver and coated with a fine layer of glimmering snow crystals. Its appearance was clearly designed to blend with the surroundings. However, it didn't seem much like a monster. Especially since it had silver eyes, instead of the customary crimson that most monsters did.

“Squeak, squeak.”

Plus, it just looked so cute. The way it cautiously approached while it tilted its head was almost enough to get the party to lower their guard. Even Yue smiled a little. The silver bunny hopped over to Hajime, who stood at the head of the party. It sniffed his shoes, then looked up at him, cuteness radiating from its every pore. Hajime looked down at it with a smile.

Aaah, I knew it. Everyone thought simultaneously. *He really did mellow out after conquering Haltina’s labyrinth.* Before, Hajime had separated the world into those who were his enemy and those who weren’t, killing anyone who got in his way. In order to return home, he’d been willing to sacrifice anything and everything else. But thanks to the people he’d met since falling into the abyss he’d slowly started to change. After finding a way home, he’d started returning to old, kind Hajime he used—

“Your tricks won’t work on me, filth.”

Squelch! What? Everyone thought, stunned. *What’s that red stuff spilling out from under his shoe? Why’s the cute little bunny twitching like that? And where’d its head go? Oh, it’s underneath his shoe...*

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah, Nagumo-kun, how could youuuuuu!” Suzu wailed. She looked like the man in *The Scream*. Shizuku was so shocked she fainted, and Kouki hurriedly caught her as she fell. Kaori covered her face with her hands and squatted down on the spot, while Yue and Tio exchanged glances and sighed. Shea, on the other hand, shrieked and backed away from the gruesome spectacle.

“Squeak, squeak!?”

“Squeak!?”

More bunnies hopped out from behind the pillars, mourning the loss of their friend. They hopped toward Hajime, squeaking reproachfully at him. However, they weren’t intimidating in the slightest. All they could do was throw themselves harmlessly at his legs. They were clearly cute, harmless little animals.

And yet— “Tch. Fuck off.”

Hajime mercilessly started squashing them. He also grabbed one by the ears and lifted it up. The bunny trembled helplessly, squeaking for mercy. Unable to bear it any longer, Shea said, “U-Umm, Hajime-san? Don’t you think that’s enough? I mean, they’re not attacking us or anything, and they look pretty scared...”

“Huh? What’re you saying?”

Shea’s words didn’t register to Hajime at all. Shizuku, who’d regained consciousness, and Suzu gave Shea shouts of encouragement, urging her to keep trying to get through to him.

“Hajime-san! I’m your girlfriend, right!?”

“Y-Yeah, you are, but where’d that come from? You’re making me blush.”

Hajime bashfully averted his gaze. Shea and Yue both preserved that image in their memory, determined to never forget it. As that expression of Hajime’s was one he didn’t show often, it should have been further proof that he’d begun mellowing out, and yet— “That’s right, I’m your girlfriend, Hajime-san! And your bunny!”

Shea grabbed her bunny ears to show off how much like a rabbit she was.

“You know, this really isn’t the time or place for this. I’m happy you think so, but you’re making it hard to concentrate.”

Hajime’s troubled expression was just as priceless as his shy one. However, despite acting extremely cute, Hajime didn’t stop slaughtering bunnies as he responded to Shea. In fact, he accidentally used so much force he sliced off one bunny’s pair of ears. He then punched the bunny so hard it crashed into the opposite wall, leaving only a stain behind. The pristine wall of ice now had a smear of red on it.

“Tch. Fucking disgusting bunny ears.”

Hajime looked at the pair of bunny ears he’d ripped off like they were putrid garbage, then tossed them aside.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Yue-saaaaaaaaaaaaaan. I don’t understand Hajime-san anymooooooooooooore!”

“Mmm... Bad Hajime!”

“What’re you mad at me for?”

Shea hugged Yue tight, and Yue gently tried to console her while admonishing Hajime. He couldn’t understand what there was to be mad about, though.

“You know, Hajime-kun. Those bunnies are sort of related to Shea, right? Plus they’re so cute there really isn’t any reason to be killing them. I think that’s what Shea was trying to say too.”

Pale-faced, Kaori tried to explain the problem to Hajime.

“She’s right, Master. Besides, such a gruesome method of slaughter is...”

Even Tio was objecting to Hajime’s actions.

“Squeak!”

A veritable avalanche of bunnies poured out from the gaps in the pillars. Faced with such overwhelming numbers, Hajime was forced to open up his Treasure Trove. There was a series of metallic clanks, a flash of light, and suddenly a spray of needles turned the rabbits into pincushions. The avalanche of rabbits spasmed and threw up blood as Hajime’s needles pierced their organs, sending them to the afterlife. Hajime had used one of his new weapons, the revolver-style shotgun Alvus. It was a different kind of weapon that retained the lethality of his railgun-powered firearms without any of the noise or recoil. Instead of using gunpowder he’d packed the needles into miniature, disposable Treasure Troves which he’d made using evolution magic. By compressing them to an extremely small space, they shot out with lethal force when released. Furthermore, the needles were coated with a potent poison Hajime had found in the abyss.

“Hey, you guys. Stop spacing out and help me kill these things. Just be careful not to use any big attacks or make too much noise, or the snow’ll cave in around us.”

Hajime set about slaughtering the bunnies in the fastest and most efficient manner possible, showing just how serious he was about this. Kouki, Ryutarou, Suzu, and Shizuku watched on in horror.

“Y-You monsteeeeeeeeeeer!” They shouted. *So much for Nagumo returning to being a kinder person!* Fortunately, their screams didn’t cause an avalanche.

The party continued forward, Hajime leaving mounds of bunny corpses in their wake. By the time his lagomorphian genocide was complete, they were only three hundred meters from the frost caverns’ entrance.

“Like I said, those things were all monsters,” Hajime grumbled, a sour look on his face. He was tired of the girls, especially Shizuku, Suzu, and Shea telling him off for his actions. The rabbit extermination had left the three of them in tears. According to Hajime, those rabbits had possessed special magic that allowed them to drain the heat from others. He’d noticed when the first bunny had gotten within the radius of his Airzone. He’d even grabbed one just to make sure, and as he’d suspected, the bunny had started stealing his body heat at a prodigious rate. Meaning those bunnies were actually crafty monsters that used their cuteness to get close to their target, then kill them by draining all their body heat.

“If you let yourself get fooled by their cuteness, you would have been a popsicle in minutes. And they started coming in droves after a while... they might look cute, but trust me, they’re the real monsters.”

It seemed Hajime was still holding a grudge over being called a monster. Shizuku and the others awkwardly averted their gazes.

“Actually wait, didn’t you guys notice when the first one came close? It was close enough to affect you guys too. I know you two realized at least, Yue, Tio. You could have helped me out, but no, you left me to deal with all of them.”

“Mmm... I was busy consoling Shea.”

“M-My apologies, Master. But when I saw Shea crying, I felt so guilty that I just I couldn’t... Besides, you seemed to be handling them just fine.”

“What kind of excuse is that!? Also, Shea, stop crying.”

Watching Hajime mercilessly shred through hordes of rabbits and rip off their ears had left Shea traumatized.

“I can’t help it! I know they’re monsters, but you just kept ripping off their

ears without any mercy. How could I watch that and not be sad!?”

Sighing, Hajime walked over to Shea and gently stroked her ears.

“Shit is shit, and you’re you, Shea. The only bunny I care about is you. So why would I hesitate about killing a bunch of other shitty ones?”

“I-I guess that makes sense. Hehehe.”

Shea gave Hajime a warm smile. She really was easy to please. Seeing Hajime and Shea start flirting again, Kaori pouted and murmured, “Mrr... Whenever I see something like this it really feels like Hajime-kun’s accepted Shea.”

“Indeed. Well, it’s too soon to give up, Kaori. That future will be ours if we persevere a little longer.”

“You’re right. Let’s both do our best.”

Yue turned to Kaori as she pumped herself up and scoffed.

“Kaori... You’re wasting your time. Don’t bother.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean, huh!?”

Kaori reached out to Yue to pull her cheeks, but Yue slapped her hands away.

The two repeated the same sequence of actions over and over. The others had gotten used to this spectacle over the past few days, and Suzu turned to Shizuku with a smile.

“At this rate, Nagumo-kun might really accept Kaorin and Tio-san as his girlfriends. It’s hard to imagine he’s the same guy he was in Japan. Don’t you think so too, Shizushizu?”

“.....”

Shizuku didn’t reply. Or rather, she hadn’t even heard Suzu. She was watching her best friend mess around with an almost wistful expression. But was it really Kaori reflected in her pupils, or was it—

“Shizushizu?”

“Ah. Wh-What is it, Suzu?”

“Oh, nothing important... Are you okay? You looked like you were spacing out

for a second.”

“Oh yes, I’m fine. Sorry for worrying you. I’ll focus, don’t worry.”

Shizuku gave Suzu a reassuring smile.

“.....”

Kouki, who was walking at the back of the party, grimaced. He nearly let his annoyance show through, but he reflexively tried to hide it, leading to the pained grimace. Ryutarou walked over to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Sheesh, Kaori’s at it again. She’s really gotten feisty recently. You think so too, right Kouki?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. She used to be the one to scold us for fighting too much.”

Kouki looked at Ryutarou blankly for a second, but he quickly gave him a troubled smile. Seeing the nostalgic look on Kouki’s face drove away the niggling anxieties Ryutarou had had regarding his best friend. He grinned and said, “Tell me about it!”

Just then, Tio, who’d walked ahead of the group to get a read on the wind turned back and said, “Hmm. I dislike this breeze. It reeks of despair.”

The corridor they were advancing down ended in a T-junction. Even from a glance, it was obvious a furious gale awaited them regardless of which direction they took. Normal humans would have had trouble even standing in such winds. Hajime walked into the intersection and checked the compass.

“Looks like... we gotta go right. We’re gonna have to get through the headwind somehow—Tio.”

“As you wish.”

Tio responded immediately. She was more suited to dealing with wind magic than Yue was. After all, her race used wind magic all the time to fly. When it came to wind magic specifically, Tio was more skilled than even Yue. Just as Tio was about to cast her spell though, Suzu called out to her.

“Wait, Tio-san! Let me handle this!”

She was starting to get annoyed at the fact that all she’d been doing so far

was either cowering in fear or screaming in terror. Both during Hajime's genocide, and when Tio had thrown her off the cliff. Gaze resolute, she looked up at Tio. Held in her hands were the two new artifacts Hajime had given her. At a glance, they seemed to be no more than small rectangular blocks. But in truth, they were a pair of iron-ribbed fans, weapons Hajime had customized to suit a barrier master. In fact, they'd been bound to Suzu's mana and blood, so only she could use them. Naturally they were sturdy and helped Suzu cut down the length of her chants, but in addition, Hajime had used evolution magic to enhance any defensive spells channeled through them. Furthermore, the specific abilities of each fan complemented each other. The right fan was used to cast traditional barrier spells, while the left fan could add secondary effects to those barriers, allowing Suzu to use composite magic. Her fans also absorbed trace amount of her mana at all times and stored it for future use, as well as reducing the mana consumption of spells cast with them. Essentially, they were far more powerful than the bracelets Suzu had been using thus far. Hajime turned toward Suzu. When he saw the clear determination in her eyes, he nodded without complaint.

"It's probably a good idea for you to get some practice in."

"Indeed. I agree with Master. Suzu, I leave this in your hands."

Tio smiled at Suzu, and she nervously smiled back, eager to show off the fruits of her training. She stepped forward and unfurled her twin fans. "Awaken, Steel Fans!" Suzu shouted the keyword to activate her artifacts, and they began to glow with a faint orange light. The light originated from the handles and extended to each of the folds in the fans in turn.

"Alright, here I go! Hallowed Ground - Dispersal!"

Suzu said only the name of her spell, then swung her fans.



A translucent orange barrier appeared in front of Hajime and the others. Pulses of light intermittently spread from the center of the barrier to its curved surface. The strongest barrier spell had been fused with advanced level light magic to create Hallowed Ground - Dispersal. Now the barrier also diffused the energy of anything it came into contact with. Though Suzu had cast the spell with the ease one might expect a beginner-level spell, its strength wasn't diminished in any way. Furthermore, it even had additional effects tacked on, and only cost as much mana as an intermediate-level spell. Suzu truly had trained hard. She stepped into the intersection and braved the wind head-on. Instead of stopping the gale, her barrier deflected it, weakened it, and let it pass through. The rest of the party felt only a gentle breeze.

"Wow. Nice going, Suzu."

"Mmm... Not half-bad."

The two magic experts in the party praised Suzu's skills. Though part of it was due to her new artifacts, it was true that Suzu herself had improved quite a bit as well. So much so that both Kaori and Yue were impressed. Suzu grinned triumphantly. She tried to keep herself from looking too smug since she knew she had to concentrate, but she couldn't help but let out a few happy giggles. The party continued down the corridor, with Suzu at the head to blunt the force of the storm. Before long, they spotted a faint light up ahead. Hajime narrowed his eyes and focused his vision.

"Is that it?"

They arrived in a well-lit opening. In front of them was a large, isosceles-triangle-shaped opening. It was two meters high at its highest point, and the area around it was covered not with piled snow, but hardened ice. Its shape was just unnatural enough to look manmade, but also jagged enough to appear natural. Regardless of the nature of its origin, it had a mystical aura to it, as if it were a temple of sorts. The ice at the back of the opening had a huge crack in it. Ice pillars jutted out of the crack, blooming like crystal flowers, inviting all who beheld them into the darkness. Hajime double-checked his compass, and as he suspected, the needle pointed straight into the fissure. The sense he got from the compass also told him he needed to go inside. *So this is the entrance to the*

last of the seven labyrinths, the Frost Caverns.

“Ah, the wind stopped. I’ll dispel my barrier.”

Suzu lowered her fans, and the barrier faded away. Like she’d said, the wind had faded the moment the group entered the triangular opening. It was dead silent inside. Not a single noise could be heard.

“Looks like we made it. But... Hajime-san!”

“Yeah, I know. Everyone watch out, something’s coming!”

Shea’s ears twitched and she narrowed her eyes dangerously. Her enhanced hearing picked up on multiple noises growing steadily closer. Hajime sensed them as well with his superhuman perception and shouted out a warning. Yue, Kaori, and Tio remained relaxed, but Kouki and the others tensed up. A second later they heard it.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With an ear-piercing roar, six monsters jumped out. They looked like three-meter large gorillas with snow-white fur. However, unlike normal gorillas, these walked exclusively on two feet. In fact, they resembled a certain mythical earth monster.

“Bigfoots?”

Indeed, the monsters looked like the bigfoot that enthusiasts seemed to love talking about so much on television. They kicked up clouds of ice and dust as they dashed across the ground toward the party. *If I took one of these back with me to earth, I could become one of Time magazine’s people of the year. Ah well, time to kill ’em.* Hajime casually unholstered Donner. Before he could fire though, Kouki leaped forward.

“Let’s do this, Shizuku, Ryutarou, Suzu!”

“Hell yeah! We’re conquering the labyrinth for sure this time!”

“Leave the defense to me! Shizushizu, let’s go!”

“Alright. There are a few things I want to test as well. Nagumo-kun, do you mind leaving these enemies to us?”

Hajime shrugged his shoulders and retreated to a corner of the room together with Yue and the others. This was a good chance for him to observe how well the other artifacts he'd given Kouki and the others functioned. He observed them with a craftsman's eye, his pupils glowing.

"Shizuku-chan, Suzu-chan, don't do anything reckless, okay!?"

"Good luck, guys!"

Kaori brought her hands together as if praying while Shea struck a cheerleading pose and shouted out encouragement to the four of them. Kouki raised his sword high and shouted, "Soar, Celestial Flash - Shatter!"

With a mighty swing, he let loose his favorite attack, Celestial Flash. Though he'd barely chanted an incantation at all, his Celestial Flash was twice as large and powerful as before. *Looks like the holy sword really wasn't operating at peak efficiency before.* Kouki's blade of light threatened to split the very air. For once, he was living up to his title of hero. Furthermore, thanks to Hajime's external improvements, each attack unleashed its own shockwaves as well.

Surprised by the ferocity of Kouki's initial assault, the bigfoots faltered. They stopped their headlong rush and scattered to avoid Kouki's Celestial Flash. However, their reaction came a moment too late. While they managed to avoid the attack itself, the shockwaves it emitted sent the bigfoots flying.

"I was waiting for that! Take this— Death Fist!"

"Ook eek!?"

Ryutarou jumped up to where one of the bigfoots got blown back and drew his fist back. He'd been ready for this. He twisted his body, using all of his weight and momentum to deliver a right hook that slammed right into the bigfoot's torso. The air shook from the force of the impact, and blood squirted out of every one of the bigfoot's orifices. It flew backward and crashed into a wall, dead as dead could be. Death Fist was one of Ryutarou's new skills that bypassed an enemy's defenses and destroyed their internal organs. The gauntlets he'd been given by the Heiligh Kingdom had originally possessed the ability to emit shockwaves, but nothing on this level. Hajime had upgraded them to also oscillate at a very high frequency, thus multiplying their destructive power. He'd also enchanted them with spatial magic to cause those

oscillations to spread into the surrounding area. That bigfoot hadn't stood a chance.

"Alright, that's one down!"

Ryutarou struck a victory pose as he landed. A shadow dashed past him, moving too fast to follow with the eye. A second later there was a sound of wind rushing past and one of the bigfoots slumped to the ground, dead. As it hit the ground its head rolled off. Shizuku calmly resheathed her sword next to it. Her swordsmanship had been so fast the bigfoot hadn't even been able to register it. It hadn't even seen its own death coming. The remaining bigfoots started to back up when they saw how easily two of their comrades had been killed. At least, two of them did. But the other two...

"Suzu-chan!"

Kaori called out a warning. A second later, the ground behind Suzu and Kouki burst open. The remaining two bigfoots jumped out of the ice. They must have used their special magic the moment they'd landed to burrow into the ice. Assured of their victory, the bigfoots bore down on Suzu.

"Swallow them whole— Hallowed Ground - Burst!"

However, Suzu calmly turned around and raised her fans. Two barriers appeared from their tips, protecting her. The bigfoots' talons bounced off the hardened barriers. Right after the attacks were deflected, the barriers exploded. A surge of orange mana spread out from the point of the explosion.

"Gyaaaaah!?"

The two bigfoots were caught by surprise and were sent flying backward. Blood sprayed through the air as they flew, along with glittering shards of orange. Hallowed Ground - Burst was, as its name suggested, basically a barrier burst. Though it functioned specifically as a kind of reactionary shockwave that directed itself at anything that struck it. It converted the energy stored within the barrier to destructive force and turned the barrier into a kind of shrapnel grenade. Furthermore— "Swallow them whole— Hallowed Ground - Bind!"

Suzu launched a follow-up attack against one of the wounded bigfoots. A whirlpool of mana appeared at its landing point. The orange whirlpool absorbed

the nearby snow making it into a localized blizzard. The moment the bigfoot landed, the whirlpool expanded, turning into a barrier that trapped the monster. It attempted to get to its feet to shatter the barrier, but stumbled the moment it did so.

“Ook eek!?”

It tried to get up a second time, but seemed unable to put any strength into its limbs. In fact, it seemed to be taking all of its strength just to stay on all fours. But that was only natural. Hallowed Ground - Bind used gravity magic to deploy a barrier that contained a localized gravitational field. It was meant to seal foes. The bigfoot’s bleeding grew more intense as the pressure against it mounted.

“Kouki-kun, you take care of the other one!”

“On it! Radiant Slash!”

Kouki rushed forward, his holy sword glowing pure white. He raised it up high to cleave the bigfoot in two, but was stopped by part two of the monsters’ surprise attack. Pillars of ice fell toward him like a hail of spears. The two bigfoots that had looked to be retreating had actually been keeping their distance from Shizuku and Ryutarou while gathering up pillars to lob at Kouki. That being said, this surprise attack was still something Kouki could deal with. While the barrage covered too wide an area to dodge, he could easily intercept the pillars. Kouki slowed down and prepared to turn around.

“Keep going!”

A clear voice echoed across the battlefield and a shadow interspersed itself between Kouki and the oncoming pillars. It was Shizuku, her ponytail fluttering in the breeze. She wasn’t going to let this attack stop Kouki. She drew her black katana and shouted, “Gather— Confluence!”

The pillars of ice changed trajectory and flew toward Shizuku’s sword as if it were some kind of magnet. This was one of the new abilities Hajime had enchanted Shizuku’s katana with, a gravity field that absorbed anything. The ice pillars bore down on Shizuku with unbelievable speed. There shouldn’t have been any way for her to cut them all down, yet she seemed calm.

I wanted to try this out in an actual battle. I'll have to get the timing down perfect! Shizuku activated the trump card she'd obtained from the previous labyrinth. In other words, one of the evolution magic spells she'd learned as a reward.

"Sublimate— Limiter Removal!"

It felt as though sparks were dancing in her brain. Time slowed to a crawl and she perceived the world in monochrome. Her senses magnified to encompass more than before, and her reflexes sharpened. She could feel power filling every muscle in her body.

"Gale!"

A gust of wind blew past. One second passed, then another. Suddenly, the pillars of ice broke apart into tiny glittering shards. To the naked eye, it seemed as though Shizuku hadn't done anything at all. Yet the pillars of ice had all been chopped into miniscule pieces. Shizuku had cut them all. In that brief instant, she'd sliced through a barrage of pillars. Her slashes had been so fast they'd formed a barrier of attacks. Anything that had moved within reach of her sword had been cut apart multiple times. It was hard to tell how many times Shizuku had even slashed each pillar. Factoring in the shockwaves, she must have unleashed dozens of attacks in that one second. Shizuku's attacks had already been so fast they barely left afterimages, so now that she'd gotten her hands on evolution magic, they'd reached the point where they couldn't be seen at all.

"Haah..."

She breathed a deep sigh. A second later, gravity once again reasserted itself on the shards of ice and they clattered to the ground. Shizuku turned toward Kouki, expecting him to have finished off his target. However, that proved not to be the case...

"Dammit!"

The bigfoot had managed to dodge Kouki's Radiant Slash by a hair's breadth. It wasn't because the monster had found a second wind. No, it was because of Kouki's own mistake. His conflicted feelings over being protected by Shizuku had caused him to hesitate for just an instant.

“Sorry, I let them get away! What the hell’s with these guys anyway!?” Ryutarou, who was supposed to have been chasing the remaining two bigfoots, yelled in the distance. From the looks of it, their special magic allowed them to manipulate ice. But what the two other bigfoots were doing defied everyone’s expectations.

“I-I guess it’s kinda fitting.”

They were skating. Calmly and elegantly, their fur swaying in the breeze. It was impressive how skillfully they navigated their way across the frozen ground. The last surviving bigfoot regrouped with them a short distance away and the three started skating in tandem, synchronizing their movements perfectly. They looked like Olympic skaters with how smoothly they glided across the ice. It was no surprise that Kouki and the others were stunned. In fact, even Hajime and the others were surprised by this turn of events. Hajime even took out one of his artifacts to snap a picture of the surreal sight. Shizuku and Ryutarou retreated to where Kouki was, keeping a wary eye on the three skating bigfoots the whole time. After a few seconds, Kouki finally snapped back to his senses.

“If they’re coming at us head-on, that just makes this easier! Soar, Celestial Flash - Shatter!”

A huge blade of light hurtled toward the bigfoots, a tornado of shockwaves surrounding it. Kouki was done with this farce. None of the bigfoots tried to dodge. Just as Kouki was convinced this fight was over, they once again defied all expectations.

“Wha!? Did they just do a triple axel!?”

The bigfoots instantly transitioned from speed skaters to figure skaters. Fur bristling in the wind, the bigfoots jumped right over the Celestial Flash and spun thrice in the air. Kouki’s attack passed harmlessly underneath them and slammed into the wall. Shards of ice danced through the air as the bigfoots changed from a horizontal formation to a vertical one with far more grace than their size suggested. Kouki’s jaw dropped open. Even Hajime exclaimed, “No way!?” Everyone was awestruck. Once again, Hajime snapped a few pictures. The three bigfoots landed right in front of Kouki and the others and launched a synchronized series of roundhouse kicks, using their earlier triple axels to give

them more force.

“Kyaa!?”

“Whoa!?”

Shizuku and Ryutarou hurriedly backstepped out of the way, just barely avoiding the bigfoots’ kicks.

“You little— Radiant Slash!”

Kouki launched a counterattack as he dodged his kick. The bigfoot bent backward, balancing perfectly on one foot, and avoided Kouki’s horizontal slash. These bigfoots’ skating abilities were on par with Ina Bauer’s.

“A-Are you fucking kidding me!?”

“Hey, calm down, Kouki!”

Determined to prove his worth and earn the right to inherit this labyrinth’s magic, Kouki grit his teeth and charged. At a glance, it certainly did seem like the bigfoots were toying with the party, what with their ludicrous movements. However, they were really just fighting in the way they knew best. Kouki was unable to think calmly enough to realize that though, and his frustration only grew as the bigfoots continued to avoid him with their elegant maneuvers.

The three bigfoots scattered, circled around Kouki, and launched a pincer attack. They once again dexterously leaped into the air. This time they supplemented their jump with an unbelievable eightfold spin toe loop jump. They spread their arms wide, creating a deadly whirlwind with their talons as they spun. It was the most deadly work of art Hajime had seen. In response, Shizuku stepped forward and drew her sword.

“Haaah— Flash Blitz!”

She frowned as her enhanced dynamic vision caught sight of bigfoots’ grinning faces. She slashed at the one in front of her then jumped out of the way, along with Kouki and Ryutarou. A second later, the three bigfoots landed where the trio had been standing. Like the rest of their moves, their landing was perfect. Unfortunately, one of the three bigfoots had been cut cleanly in half.

“Ook eek!?”

The remaining two screeched in surprise. Flash Blitz was one of the new moves Hajime had added to Shizuku's black katana. It cut through space itself, so unless the opponent also had the ability to manipulate space, it was impossible to defend against.

"Pay attention, Kouki, Ryutarou. As long as you don't get swept up in their erratic movements you should be able to handle them. Let's finish this up. Suzu's already killed her targets."

"Y-Yeah. Damnit, why'd these guys have to be the first enemies we run into?"

Cursing, Kouki jumped into action. Ryutarou leaped in after him with a grimace. Realizing their gambit had failed, the remaining bigfoots dropped their exaggerated movements. They tried to fight Kouki and the others head-on, but failed spectacularly. In the time it took Kouki and the others to mop up the remnants, Suzu finished crushing her target with her gravity barrier.

The four of them came out of the fight more or less unscathed. It was a total victory. But for some reason, Kouki wasn't satisfied. Ryutarou and the others were still recovering from the shock of fighting a group of ice-skating bigfoots. Hajime grinned and said, "Nice work you guys."

"Don't laugh at me! How come this labyrinth has stupid monsters like that!?"

Hajime waved off Kouki's complaints with a wave of his hand. He then turned to Yue and Shea and asked, "Is it just me or did those monsters remind you of Miledi?"

Both girls nodded in unison. Hajime could just imagine Miledi saying "How'd you like my present, huh guys? How'd you enjoy fighting a bunch of ice-skating gorilla monsters in sub-zero temperatures? Had fun? Of course you did! No need to thank me!"

"Mmm... Miledi had a hand in making these."

"Definitely. She's the only one who can make things *that* annoying."

Vandre Schnee, the creator of this labyrinth, must have been just as annoyed to follow Miledi's bidding and place those monsters here. While Hajime, Yue, and Shea were reminiscing about the past, Tio turned to Suzu and said, "That was a splendid display of barrier magic, Suzu. You've grown much in these past

few days.”

“Hweh!? You really think so? Hehehe.”

Yue stopped waxing nostalgic and turned to Suzu as well. “Mmm... not bad,” she said with a faint smile. Suzu blushed bright red and scratched her cheek.

Kaori also smiled at Suzu and said, “Yeah, you did great. You all did! You’re way stronger than you were when we conquered the Haltina Woods. I’m impressed!”

“Hehe, I know right? Though I guess we’ve got Nagumo’s new weapons to thank for that.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess. But we’ve gotten stronger ourselves too.”

Ryutarou blushed as well. He could tell everyone’s praise wasn’t just flattery. On the other hand, Kouki still had a bitter expression on his face.

Shea suddenly turned to Shizuku and said, “Oh yeah, Shizuku-san! You used evolution magic during that fight, didn’t you? I’m still practicing with it, so it was nice to see how it works in action.”

“Ah, I saw that too, Shizushizu! Actually, I couldn’t see it at all, but you cut everything, right? It was so fast!”

No one noticed Kouki’s eyebrows twitch slightly at that. All eyes were on Shizuku, who blushed and nodded.

“Yes, I did. Just for an instant, when I drew my blade. It drains a lot of mana, but I wanted to practice it in actual combat before we start fighting tougher enemies... I think I have the hang of it now.”

Overjoyed, Kaori hugged Shizuku, who patted her head like she would a small animal.

“Even I could barely follow that... You can’t pull off moves like that with just evolution magic. You must have trained your techniques a ton. That was pretty damn good.”

Even Hajime praised Shizuku’s skills.

“Huh? Oh, u-uhh well umm... thank you?”

Shizuku awkwardly averted her gaze and started fiddling with her katana.

“Why’re you phrasing it like a question?” Hajime said with a chuckle, then turned to Shea.

“Shea. You have a habit of relying on brute force, so try learning from Yaegashi’s moves.”

“Yeaaaaah. I’m learning a lot though! I’ll try punching so fast you can’t see it next time!”

“On second thought, just how overpowered are you going to get if you manage to learn proper techniques?”

“Mmm... The gentle rabbits of the forest are no more.”

Joking among themselves, Hajime and the others walked toward the entrance of the Frost Caverns proper. Kouki and the rest followed behind, still discussing the earlier fight. The party stopped right before the entrance. Hajime looked over his shoulder and gave everyone his trademark fearless smile.

“You guys ready?”

Everyone, even Kouki, nodded silently. Hajime nodded back and said, “Then let’s get this last labyrinth squared away.”

His words echoed down the dark caverns.

The inside of the Frost Caverns was an ominous and mysterious place. The walls on either side were made of ice so clear one could see straight through them, but they also reflected light, causing barely perceptible shadows to be cast across them. Every time the party moved, the shadows moved with them, giving the impression that something was following them just out of sight. Despite their enthusiasm, Kouki and Suzu remained wary, with weapons in hand. When they finally realized it was their own shadows they were afraid of, they both blushed in embarrassment. *This place looks like some hack’s failed attempt at making a mirror house.* Hajime thought to himself as he scrutinized the frozen walls.

“There isn’t anything dangerous about these walls but... it’s annoying how

they keep reflecting our shadows.”

“There was a ghost story that went like this, wasn’t there? A group of people got stranded in a snowed-in hut and after a while, their shadows started becoming people.”

“D-Don’t say that, Shizuku-chan! You know I’m not good with scary stories!”

“Ah, sorry. I forgot how jittery you were. Remember when Endou-kun spooked you by standing behind you and you smacked him with your staff?”

“Why’d you have to bring that up!? Ah, it’s not what you think, Hajime-kun! I’m not a violent woman! I just get scared easy! Please don’t hate me! Please don’t back away from me like that!”

Kaori desperately tried to make excuses. However, Hajime wasn’t buying them.

“No kidding? You killed Endou just cause he was standing behind you? Poor dude...”

“Mmm... So in scary places, Kaori turns into a devil. Good to know.”

“Yue!?”

“Everyone, please keep clear of Kaori-san! She’s a savage beast!”

“You too, Shea!? Meanie!”

“You know, Endou flew pretty far, considering he was hit by someone whose job is Priest. Watching that sent shivers down my spine.”

“Yeah, he really flew... Kaorin’s scary!”

“I can’t believe you two would betray me too, Suzu-chan, Ryutarou-kun... Tioooooooo, everyone’s bullying me! Please become creepy reliable Tio again so you can scold all of them!”

“K-Kaori, to think you would berate me while begging for assistance... you’ve reached a higher level than I thought possible. Haah haah.”

Tio started panting heavily as she patted Kaori’s head.

“Alright, that’s enough teasing Kaori. Let’s get going.”

“Hajime-kun that’s not helping!”

Hajime ignored Kaori’s glare and resumed walking. After a few steps, he glanced back and saw Shizuku give him a nod of gratitude. *Thanks for playing along*, she thought silently. She’d noticed that Kouki and Suzu were a little too wound up, so she’d lightened the mood by teasing Kaori. Though she hadn’t expected Hajime to join in, the fact that he had helped both Suzu and Kouki relax a little. Silently offering a prayer for her friend’s sacrifice, Shizuku smiled at Hajime.

“Shizuku.”

“Hm!? Oh, what is it, Kouki?”

“Ah... it’s nothing important. Just, it’s rare to see you teasing Kaori.”

“Fufu, I was just a little nervous. I’ll apologize to her later.”

“I see... That makes sense. Yeah, you probably should.”

Kouki smiled faintly and nodded to Shizuku. The party continued in silence, the snow-covered floor absorbing the sound of their footsteps. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew through the corridor. Hajime squinted and looked for the source of the wind. Up ahead he saw snowflakes whirling in the breeze, heading toward the party. He raised his artificial arm to block the tiny flecks. The snow melted almost instantly, but Hajime didn’t think this was normal snow. He carefully touched a melting flake with his right fingertip.

“Tio—No, Taniguchi. Put up the same barrier you did last time. As fast as you can.”

“O-Okay!”

Hajime’s voice was calm, but firm. Suzu jumped, but then instantly cast her Hallowed Ground - Dispersal. Just as her orange barriers snapped into place, the wind grew stronger. It was accompanied by a flurry of snow, turning the passage into a mini-blizzard.

“Be careful. This snow isn’t normal. Touching it will give you frostbite.”

“Oww!?”

Ryutarou screamed in pain. His large frame had worked against him. Part of

his face stuck out above the barrier and was now covered in mottled red dots that resembled freckles. Kaori smiled kindly and cast a healing spell on Ryutarou. Silver light suffused his face and a second later, he was healed. Stifling a laugh at his best friend's comical new look, Kouki turned forward.

"Is this... dry ice?"

"Even if it's not, it shares similar properties to it. But even then, it freezes you way too fast."

Hajime looked down at his finger as Shizuku answered him. She took her Airzone out of her pocket and added, "We're in caverns made of ice, surrounded by a blizzard of snowflakes that will give you frostbite just from touching them... I don't even want to think about how cold it actually is. If it wasn't for our artifacts, this'd be hell."

"It'd be impossible to even drink water without them."

After healing Ryutarou, Kaori created a ball of water with magic and sent it forward. The moment it left the range of Suzu's barrier and the Airzones of the party, it froze into a solid sphere. The process happened in less than a second. The frozen ball of water fell to the ground with a clunk. Under normal circumstances, the water in everyone's canteens should have frozen solid the moment they stepped foot into the caverns.

"Indeed. Furthermore, it appears fire magic is severely weakened here. It would have been quite the ordeal to have to use advanced-level fire magic every time we wished for a drink."

"Mmm... But that's not a problem for us..." Yue pointed to the pendant she was wearing and held up the ring on her finger. Since everyone had an Airzone and their own personal Treasure Trove, the harsh conditions of the labyrinth weren't a problem at all.

"Glad to know they're coming in handy... I wouldn't want to end up like that."

As they were talking, Hajime spotted something up ahead. Yue and the others followed his gaze and saw a man encased inside the wall. His eyes were closed, as though he were just asleep. It looked as though he'd just leaned against the wall for a short break, and before he knew it he'd froze to death. Seeing as

there were no wounds on his body, chances were that was what had actually happened. However, there was one strange thing about him that Shea noticed.

“Hajime-san... It’s one thing if he was just leaning against the wall, but don’t you think it’s weird he’s inside it?”

“Good point. It’s like the wall reached out to encase him.”

Hearing that, Kaori shivered. It was as if the entire labyrinth was feeding on hapless challengers. She clung to Shizuku, just like she always had whenever the two went to a haunted house or anything similar. The look in her eyes made it clear she wouldn’t let go no matter what. Even though Kaori was a strong girl who’d managed to even make the body of a God’s Apostle her own, she still couldn’t handle horror. In some ways, she hadn’t changed at all from the person she’d been during their adventure in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. Hajime gave Kaori a rueful grin, then slid off his eyepatch and examined the frozen man more closely.

“I don’t sense any mana... From the wall or the corpse, I mean. But just in case I guess we should kill... or I guess break him.”

Since his Demon Eye hadn’t sensed anything out of the ordinary there was no real reason to mess with the corpse. But conversely, there was no reason to leave it alone either. Hajime unholstered Donner and pointed its muzzle at the corpse. He’d redesigned it a little, and the revolver was now black and sleek, like Tio’s scales, with streaks of red running down the barrel. After acquiring evolution magic he’d gotten even better at Transmuting, so he’d strengthened Donner while also remaking it with alloys that conducted the power of his Lightning Field more efficiently. Schlag had received the same treatment.

Sparks ran down Donner’s length as he reached for the trigger, appearing far more vivid than they used to. A second later there was a loud bang and two crimson streaks pierced through the frozen wall. There was a good three meters of ice separating the surface of the wall and the corpse, but Hajime’s bullets pierced through the ice like a needle through a sponge. One bullet passed through the corpse’s head while the other crushed its chest. Both traveled straight through the corpse and bored so far into the wall that they were no longer visible. For the newly improved Donner and its upgraded special bullets,

a wall of ice might as well have been a piece of paper.

“.....”

Kouki raised an eyebrow in disapproval, but he held his tongue. He knew now wasn't the time for an argument.

“Looks like we're good. I'm still curious about how that happened, but I guess we don't have to worry at least.”

Hajime kept an eye on the wall for a few seconds but neither it nor the corpse moved. The party breathed a collective sigh of relief and began walking again. Though Kaori shot multiple glances back at the wall as they left.

Sometime after Hajime and the others had left, the sound of ice cracking pierced through the incessant wind that scoured that section of the caverns.

“Gaaah goooh gugyaaah...”

Pained groans accompanied the cracking ice.

Oblivious to what was happening behind them, Hajime and the others pressed forward. Ryutarou forgot multiple times that he needed to stoop to fit inside Suzu's barrier and Kaori gave him a scolding each time as she healed him. Normally the party would have to explore to find the right path, but thanks to the compass Hajime always knew which way to go.

“This is too easy. We've come pretty far in, but nothing's happened still.”

Hajime kept his guard up, concerned at how smooth their progress had been.

“Mmm... This isn't normal for a labyrinth. If there was really nothing here, then why are there so many corpses?”

Yue was, of course, referring to the corpses stuck in the walls. Finding dead adventurers within a labyrinth was hardly a cause for concern, but the sheer number the party had seen over the past few minutes was abnormal. Especially since this was a quiet path that didn't even have any monsters in it. Hajime doubted so many people could have been done in by the harsh weather alone.

“Ah. There's more...” Suzu muttered. She walked directly behind Hajime with

her fans held high, maintaining the barrier. Her expression was grim; seeing so many corpses had dampened her mood.

“Demons again, huh?” Kouki murmured. The corpses were indeed those of demons, with dark skin and pointed ears. There were three of them lined up next to each other. Like the rest, these men also looked like they were just sleeping.

“We must have passed 50 or so by now. And most of them were demons.”

Shizuku breathed a heavy sigh. Though they were ostensibly at war with the demon kingdom, she couldn't help but feel sorry for these demons. On the other hand, Hajime didn't seem affected at all. He stroked his jaw and said, “This is just a guess, but if Freid conquered this labyrinth, these are probably his soldiers. I bet he sent his army in after he cleared it to see if any of them could make it too.”

“That makes sense. If the demons' advantage was that they can control monsters, then they probably wanted to make sure as many of them got that power as possible.”

Supporting that theory was the fact that the majority of demons they'd passed so far had all been wearing the same military uniform as the demons that had attacked Heiligh's capital. Those who were wearing adventurers' outfits or older uniforms were likely people who'd tried to challenge the labyrinth on their own, or from joint expeditions centuries ago.

“Hmm. I suppose they believed themselves capable since they were aware of what to expect. Yet it clearly did not end well for them. Considering how many other routes there are, a great deal of demons must have died here.”

“But if the whole demon army challenged this labyrinth, doesn't that mean people other than that Freid guy might have conquered it as well? In that case, it's only a matter of time before they rebuild their forces,” Kaori said worriedly. She was thinking of the classmates and friends she'd left behind in Heiligh. Even without Eri's betrayal, the demon army would likely have been able to overrun the capital. Were it not for Hajime, the human race would be in dire straights.

“Don't worry, Kaori. I don't think they'll attack again this soon. Besides, the barrier's been repaired and Yuka's keeping an eye out for any other spies. But

most importantly, the demons don't know Hajime's laser weapon has been damaged. Even if they manage to rebuild their army, they'll be wary."

"Shizuku-chan... Yeah, you're right. They'll be fine."

Kaori breathed a sigh of relief. However, she still looked a little worried, which was something Shizuku didn't fail to notice. *She's happy she can finally get back home, but she's probably worried about what will happen to Lily and the others when she does.* Returning to Earth with Hajime would mean abandoning Liliana. Of course, the neverending war between humans and demons along with the gods manipulating events from the background were both things that had been going long before Hajime and the others were summoned to Tortus. However, just because that was true it didn't mean Shizuku could justify abandoning the friends she'd made here.

At the same time, Shizuku understood. She knew that it would take power on par with a god to obtain everything she wanted. Humans were limited in what they could do, and they always had to make choices on what to protect and what to abandon. And Shizuku had no right to make that choice, not when she was relying on Hajime's power like this. If she asked for anything more it would no longer be making a choice, but plain and simple begging. Just then, Kouki butt into the conversation.

"Don't worry, Kaori. Once I get my hands on this ancient magic, I'll defeat god. I'll protect Lily... No, not just Lily. I'll protect everyone in this world, humans, and demons. That means I'll have to stay behind a while longer, but I'll be able to return on my own once I clear all the other labyrinths. I won't abandon anyone!"

"Kouki-kun..."

Those were exactly the kind of words a hero would say. Yet for some reason, they lacked the pure-hearted optimism that had been present in Kouki's older declarations. It was clear from where he was looking that Kouki wasn't saying this for Kaori's sake. Though he spoke of protection, his words were like a spear, hurtled at the target of his animosity. That target was naturally Hajime.

Rather than reassuring Kaori, Kouki only managed to give her something else to worry about. She turned to Shizuku, hoping she had a solution for this.

However, Shizuku seemed as much at a loss for what to do as Kaori. This was the first time she'd seen such darkness in his gaze. Back on Earth, he'd never been like this. Jealousy, doubt, impatience, irritation, frustration—every manner of negative emotion swirled around inside Kouki's head. It took all his willpower to keep them under control, and his willpower was slipping. Noticing Kouki's gaze, Hajime looked back over his shoulder. After looking into his eyes for a few seconds, Hajime turned his gaze to Kaori. Honestly, he was used to dealing with Kouki. But he didn't want to see Kaori looking like that. So he scratched his cheek awkwardly and muttered, "Alright, alright." He returned his gaze to Kouki and said, "Amanogawa, what is it? If you've got something to say, spit it out."

"Ah... No, it's nothing."

Kouki thought he'd just be ignored, so he was surprised when Hajime actually confronted him. Kouki stiffened up for a moment, but then raised his eyebrows and once again pushed down his emotions. His face ran through a series of expressions as he struggled to master himself.

"That so? Alright then."

Ignoring Kouki's inner turmoil, Hajime turned back to Suzu and clapped her on the shoulder, letting her know it was time to continue. He then turned to Kaori and added, "If you're worried about the princess, don't be. It's not like I don't care about her at all. I'll at least leave her a few presents before we go. I'm sure she'll be fine with a Hyperion, some ICBMs, a few armored tanks, and a couple of gravity-ignoring fighter planes."

"Hajime-kun... Fufu, don't you think those are some rather unfitting presents to be giving a princess?"

Hajime's compromise succeeded where Kouki's words had not, and after a moment's surprise, Kaori smiled happily. Of course, she was still worried about leaving her friend behind during such dangerous times. But it lightened her heart knowing that Liliana and the others wouldn't be completely defenseless without the students. Shizuku smiled as well, relieved. She turned to Hajime and said jokingly, "You know, Nagumo-kun. At this rate, you're going to destroy this world's power balance. I think you should stick to defensive artifacts, or

you'll give Lily a heart attack before the demons can get to her. She'll probably worry herself to death wondering whether or not to use weapons like that."

"That's not my problem. Besides, offense is the best defense. If you kill your enemies, they can't hurt you. That princess is tougher than she looks, so she'll be fine. Just imagine a princess shooting down God's Apostles with a sniper rifle... You know, I only just thought of that but she'd look pretty cool carrying a sniper rifle. Maybe I should make her a custom one."

Had Liliana been present she would surely have screamed, "I'm a princess, not a warrior! Stop treating me like one!" Yue, Shea, and Tio watched the exchange with smiles on their faces. Before, Hajime would have just abandoned Liliana and the others to their fate, but now he'd grown kind enough to at least leave them something to defend themselves with.

Of course, that didn't mean Hajime had turned into a nice guy who was willing to help anyone and everyone who asked for it. He drew a clear line between those he'd help and those he wouldn't. He had to. If he didn't, everyone would come seeking his strength and he'd be stuck fighting for other people's causes for the rest of his life. Hence why he'd decided he wouldn't fight to save this world. He wasn't going to waste his time and energy on people he didn't know. Especially if that fight would endanger the people he cared about.

He didn't feel the least bit guilty about it, and he wouldn't hesitate to abandon those who didn't matter to him. Hajime may have grown kinder, but he still had his priorities. Some people were worth more than others. Providing Liliana with an army's worth of munitions was the most he was willing to do for her. Yue and the others understood that, and they were already satisfied with the fact that Liliana was at least someone Hajime was willing to help at all. They had no intention of asking him for more. For the same reason Shea hadn't wanted to ask Hajime to help save her family, and Kaori had parted from her childhood friends to travel with Hajime.

"All that aside, you three need to decide what you're going to do too. Are you going to stay in this world or come back with us? Like I said before, I'm not gonna wait."

“Yes, I know.”

“Yep. I’ll decide after I’ve talked with Eri.”

“I’m gonna stick with Kouki.”

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou all nodded. Their discussion came to a halt as the party reached an intersection. Every path was identical, ten meters across and ten meters high. In the center of the intersection was a fierce whirlwind that blew the snow falling from the roof into all four of the corridors.

“Taniguchi. Be ready to shift the barrier. The right path is the one directly across so we’re going to be hit with a tailwind once we pass that whirlwind.”

“Roooooger—I’ll slide it around to the back.”

Hajime looked down at the compass and Suzu started adjusting the barrier’s position. But a second later Shea’s ears perked up and she said, “Hajime-san... something’s coming. A lot of somethings, actually.”

“Monsters? About time they showed up. Where are they coming from?”

“All four directions.”

“What? You mean behind us too?”

Hajime cocked his head dubiously as he readied his guns. His confusion was understandable. On their way here, the group hadn’t encountered even a single monster. So if there were enemies approaching from the rear, it would mean both Shea and Hajime had walked right past them without sensing them. Realizing what that meant, Kouki and the others stiffened up nervously. Their expressions grew grim and they gripped their weapons tight.

“Nagumo! We know what direction we gotta go in, don’t we? Let’s just go!”

“Wait, don’t leave the hallway. I don’t want to get surrounded while we still don’t know how strong our enemies are. Kaori, protect Taniguchi’s rear. If you need to, start using your disintegration attacks. Inside a straight corridor, your abilities are the most powerful.”

“Okay! Leave it to me!”

“Tio, you put up a barrier too. Taniguchi’ll need support. You only have to

make it strong enough to divert the snow.”

“Understood.”

As Hajime barked out a series of rapid-fire commands, Yue and Shea naturally took the positions they knew he’d want them in. Kouki, who’d wanted to break through before they got pincered inside the corridor frowned unhappily. However, Shizuku managed to calm him down and he took his position at the rear. He didn’t have much time to dwell on his anger since the approaching waves of enemies required his full attention. After a few seconds, the party heard a strange noise. It sounded like moaning. More specifically, like the moaning of the damned, full of despair and hatred. A chill ran down everyone’s spine. The moaning echoed down the dark corridor, its intensity amplified by the smooth walls. Possibly due to nerves, the far end of the corridor seemed even darker than it had moments ago. Someone gulped, the sound seeming louder than it should.

“Here they come!” Hajime said in a loud voice, trying to dispel the fear settling in everyone’s hearts. A second later, they started crawling out of the darkness. The first thing everyone saw was a person. He was wearing a black military uniform and had long ears. A demon. However, there was something off about him. For one thing, his skin was pale rather than dark. For another, his eyes were clouded over, and he was moving stiffly, like a wooden doll. But most striking of all was the fact that his entire body was coated in frost. He was obviously dead.

“Wait... don’t tell me these are the corpses in the walls?”

As if answering Hajime’s question, a wave of undead people came shambling behind the first.

“Mmm... Looks like it. They’re not all demons, either.”

There were also humans dressed in adventurers’ clothes and even beastmen. One thing was certain, this wasn’t another one of the demon army’s attempts to conquer the labyrinth.

“They’re... not alive, are they? I don’t hear any heartbeats.”

Shea tilted her ears forward, confirming that they really were dead.

“Wh-What on Earth... They’re like zombies!”

The scene in front of them resembled the ones Shizuku had seen in horror films. And indeed, the corpses certainly were moving like the zombies in movies. The only difference was they were completely frozen. *I guess that makes them frost zombies.* Hajime thought to himself. Kaori, the party’s stalwart rearguard, went white as a sheet. A horror movie development like this was the one thing she couldn’t handle. Suzu trembled next to her, almost as terrified. The frost zombies turned uniformly toward the two girls, their eyes glowing dark crimson. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.”

With a series of loud moans, the zombies charged. They ran like Olympic sprinters, their earlier shambling motions nowhere to be seen. Since their corpses had been frozen their flesh hadn’t rotted, but they were otherwise just as terrifying as regular zombies. Their mouths gaped open, revealing rows of frosted teeth. And so—

“G-Get away from meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Kaori transformed into a berserker. Streams of silver mana rose up around her and she thrust both hands forward. Mana converged around her palms and a second later a disintegration beam large enough to fill the entire corridor shot out. With a thunderous roar, the beam obliterated anything in its path, leaving not even dust behind. The wave of Frost Zombies never stood a chance. By the time Kaori’s beam faded, there was nothing left. In just one attack, the Frost Zombies’ pincer attack had been defeated. The party’s escape route was clear, should they need it. Ryutarou’s lips twitched and he muttered, “When I get back to the capital I better warn Endou not to stand behind Kaori if he values his life.”

“Yeah. I’m making a mental note to never take Kaori to a haunted house again.”

She might blow up the whole building if something scares her too much... That was just how terrified Kaori was of haunted houses and ghosts.

“Waaaaaaaaah, Shizuku-chaaaaaaan! I was so scaaaared!”

You’re the scary one here! Everyone thought simultaneously.

“Well, anyway. Good work, Kaori. Now we won’t have to worry about enemies to our—”

But Hajime cut off midway.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Hajime-kun?”

His gaze was fixed on the ground at Kaori’s feet. Confused, Kaori looked down as well. There was a Frost Zombie right below her. It stared into Kaori’s eyes, and her smile froze in place. A second later, the zombie slid smoothly through the ice in the floor and thrust its hand into the air. What for? Obviously to grab onto Kaori’s leg.

“Awaah...”

Kaori’s eyes rolled back. Though she’d been raining silver death just moments ago, now the fear overwhelmed her and she nearly lost consciousness.

“Kaoriii! Don’t fall asleep! You’ll die if you do!” Shizuku screamed, unsheathing her katana. That was the standard line for someone in a group stranded in the cold, but the reason for the danger was very different. In one clean stroke, Shizuku severed the Frost Zombie’s arm. She then turned around and slapped Kaori on the face.

“Huh!? What was I—”

Wait, what’s that on my leg...? A severed arm? Oh no... Kaori fainted again, and this time Yue had to slap her awake. *Smack!*

“Y-Yue...”

“Haaah... Get it together, Kaoridiot.”

Yue sighed as she looked down at Kaori. Hundreds of zombies now filled the intersection Hajime and the others had moved back from. And though Kaori had obliterated the army behind them, more had started crawling out of the walls and floor.

“Yaegashi, stick with Kaori. You two take care of all the enemies behind us. Taniguchi, put barriers next to the walls and floor around us. Everyone else, focus on the front!”

Hajime turned to the advancing army of Frost Zombies and pulled Donner’s

trigger. Yue and Tio unleashed blasts of wind while Shea transformed Drucken into bombardment mode and started unloading shells. Kouki's blade of light traced a solitary arc through the chaos and Ryutarou launched shockwave blasts one after another. There were so many Frost Zombies there was no need to aim. Swathes of destruction cut a path through the crowd, destroying clumps of hapless zombies.

"They look like they've been doused in liquid nitrogen. How the hell are they moving?"

Hajime watched in awe as the Frost Zombies burst apart, cracks forming in their frozen bodies. From the looks of things, they'd been frozen through completely, and even when they blew up, it was solid crystals of blood that came out, not a gory splash of it.

"However, their frigidity makes them frail. I do not sense any special magic from them so... I imagine they must be hoping to overwhelm us with numbers."

Tio's assessment was spot-on.

"Oi, they're regenerating! How're we supposed to stop that!?" Ryutarou shouted, shaken. Chunks of zombie flesh started sliding across the ground, gathering together, and reforming the Frost Zombies they'd originally been parts of.

"Ugh, what is that, it's so creepy! Nagumo-kuuun, there's something wriggling over here!"

This time it was Suzu's turn to scream. Hajime turned around to see motes of red dust gathering near Suzu, forming some flesh-colored abomination.

"I guess they can regenerate from being disintegrated too. Damn."

"This isn't the time to be impressed! Kaorin's eyes have glazed over again! I'm scareeed!"

"Kaoriiiii! Keep it together! Look, it's me! Shizuku, the girl who always protects you from ghosts!"

Kaori had half-overcome her fear and was now blasting waves of disintegrating feathers at the zombies while trembling. Suzu and Shizuku were

more scared of her than they were of the zombies.

“Fufufu, disintegrate! Disintegrate! I’ll disintegrate everything!” Kaori muttered hysterically. Sighing, Yue turned to Hajime and asked, “Hajime, does your Demon Eye see anything?”

“Nope. They’re covered in a tiny layer of mana, but that’s all I can see.”

“Wait, does that mean these are the same as that thing we fought in Melusine’s labyrinth!?”

Shea thought back to the massive jellyfish monster they’d had to fight in the ocean—the Hell Eater. It had been a monster without a mana crystal, meaning it could regenerate perpetually no matter how badly it was damaged. Only by filling it full of liquified taur and setting the entire thing on fire along with half of the ocean had Hajime been able to destroy the immortal jellyfish. Just the thought of fighting something on a similar level sent shivers down Shea’s spine.

“No way. There can’t be that many of those kinds of monsters in the world. I’m pretty sure this is some kind of trick.”

Hajime gunned down zombies with one hand while he pulled out the compass with the other. What he was looking for was these zombies’ mana crystal. His guess was that there was some kind of camouflage hiding it from his Demon Eye.

“Damn that’s far. Are these things like Miledi’s golem knights?”

The compass pointed to the mana crystal as Hajime desired. However it wasn’t in any of the Frost Zombies’ bodies, but rather in a separate location over five hundred meters away. Hajime thought back to the golems Miledi had controlled remotely. He clicked his tongue, and Yue gave him a questioning look.

“Hajime?”

“Looks like the mana crystal powering these guys is somewhere else. That might be what their special magic is. I dunno if the crystal’s controlling them remotely, or if they’re just following preset orders though.”

“Interesting. Regardless of the process, the fact remains that we must destroy

that crystal if we want to end this fight.”

“Then let’s go!”

Shea let out a spirited yell and knocked aside an entire wave of zombies with one swing of Drucken. Hajime nodded and said, “I’ll cut open a path. Don’t fall behind, guys!”

He jumped into the gap Shea had created and opened his Treasure Trove. A second later a long, rectangular weapon fell into his artificial hand—the missile and rocket launcher Orkan. He tucked it under his armpit to allow him to fire with just one arm. Seconds later, the zombies were assailed by a wall of missiles. The missiles left trails of orange smoke as they barreled toward the zombies. They landed in waves, creating a ripple of thunderous explosions that blasted through the shambling crowd of zombies. Unable to withstand the impact, they were blown backward in chunks of frozen flesh. The exploded zombies were blown away with such force that their fragments served as shrapnel that tore through the zombies further behind. When the smoke cleared, a single unobstructed path was visible.

“Go!”

At Hajime’s command, the party dashed through the intersection. Yue went last in order to fire one final potshot at the zombies regenerating behind them. The environment of the Frost Caverns made fire and water magic difficult to use, but Yue had plenty of other options at her disposal. She launched a combined barrage of wind and lightning magic at the regenerating zombies, blasting them apart a second time and hurling them against the icy walls. Still, that wasn’t enough to stop them for long. Within seconds, an army of zombies was chasing the party once again. Though they weren’t very powerful individually, it was still quite terrifying being chased by an army of immortal zombies. Kaori and Suzu especially were shaking in their boots.

“Eeeeeek! They’re coming from the ceiling too! Kaorin, disintegrate them already!”

“Disintegrate, disintegrate! Aaaaaaaaaaah! It threw its arm at me! And it’s moving! It’s crawling closeeeeeer!”

“Shut up, Kaoridiot...”

“You wouldn’t understand, Yue! Vampires are part of the scaring side, not the scared side! You’re secretly working with the zombies, aren’t you!?”

“I dare you to say that again, Kaori. But fine, if you think vampires are so scary, maybe I’ll show you just how scary they can be.”

“Jeez! This isn’t the time to be fighting you two! Keep attacking, or we’ll be overrun! Hey, Suzu, your barrier’s dropping! You have to keep the blizzard at bay! No complaining!”

“Yue-san, stop playing with Kaori-san and help me out! There are tons of them coming out of the ground! I can’t keep up with just Drucken! Ah, not again... Give it a rest already, you persistent bastards! Take that!” There was a saying that said three women made as much noise as a crowd, and that proved doubly true when there were five and they were being chased by zombies. Though the reason everyone was clowning around was despite how terrifying they looked, the zombies really weren’t much of a threat. In fact, Kaori and the others were reacting with the same level of seriousness they would were they in a regular haunted house.

“My, youngsters sure are full of energy. Getting so worked up over a few monsters...” Tio muttered quietly as she watched Kaori and the others yell at each other. Yue turned to her reproachfully and said, “Tio, you sound like an old lady.”

“Fwoh!? Such harsh criticism! Well, I suppose I am that much older so I cannot deny that... but are you not in the same boat, Yue?”

“No... I’m forever seventeen.”

“Wait, didn’t you say you were imprisoned in Oscar’s labyrinth after you turned twenty, Yue?”

Even if you cut out the three hundred years you were trapped, that’s still too low. Just as Hajime thought that, Yue turned her stern gaze on him. A horde of Frost Zombies baring their fangs at him hadn’t been enough to make Hajime so much as wince, but the moment he felt that gaze on him he withered.

“Yep, Yue’s eternally seventeen. No doubt about it.”

“Mmm... I’m the same age as Hajime.”

“What a henpecked husband you are, Master.”

Tio sighed and shook her head. Everyone but Kouki and Ryutarou seemed as though they weren't even taking this fight seriously.

“Hey, Kouki. Is it just me or...”

“Don't say it, Ryutarou.”

Kouki and Ryutarou exchanged glances, then sighed. They were losing the motivation to take this seriously themselves. With the sound of gunshots, explosions, screams, and the occasional “Bastard!” from Shea serving as the group's background music, they advanced through the corridor, fleeing from the zombies. After a few minutes, Hajime and the others arrived in a vast open space. It was shaped like an arena and was easily as large as the Tokyo Dome. For some strange reason, the blizzard that had been pounding at their backs as they'd run through the corridor seemed to turn back on itself the moment it reached the corridor's exit. None of the wind made it into the dome. Hajime instinctively realized they'd reached a new section of the labyrinth. He walked to the center of the room and said, “Found it. Here I can see it with my eye even.”

Hajime pocketed the compass and grinned. His gaze was fixated on the room's far wall. Or rather, the dark crimson fist-sized lump embedded within it—a massive mana crystal. It had been buried so deep that not even his evolved Donner would be able to pierce that far in.

In that case... Hajime's Treasure Trove glimmered. This time he brought out his railgun-enhanced anti-material rifle, Schalgen. Naturally, it too had been upgraded with evolution magic. This was one of his strongest weapons, capable of blasting right through even Miledi's azantium golems that had given the party so much trouble months before. So while the ice protecting the mana crystal may not have been normal ice, Hajime was confident his rifle would penetrate it.

“Let's blow it to pieces.”

Crimson sparks started running down the long barrel's length. Hajime aimed the gun with one hand, smirked viciously, and put his finger on the trigger. Just as he was about to pull it—

“Hajime!”

Yue shouted out a warning. Sensing a presence, Hajime looked up and saw a massive eagle swooping down on the party.

“Tch, more enemies.”

The eagle wasn't any normal eagle. Its entire body was made of transparent ice. Just as the zombies were Frost Zombies, this was a Frost Eagle. And there wasn't just one. More dislodged themselves from the ceiling and dove toward the party. Before anyone could react, Hajime drew Schlag with his free left hand and fired. A single crimson streak bore through the chest of the closest Frost Eagle and unleashed a massive shockwave, destroying the creature's body. Unsatisfied, the bullet kept going and shattered another two Frost Eagles before running out of momentum. By using evolution magic, Hajime had empowered his bullets to unleash multiple shockwaves before running out of steam. He'd dubbed these improved bullets Burst Bullets. Donner and Schlag were equipped with bullets that could shoot out shockwaves three times. Having eliminated the distraction, Hajime returned his attention to Schlagen. This time, there was nothing to interrupt him from firing. With an earth-shattering boom, a streak of light shot out of the rifle's barrel. It traveled with unerring aim, headed straight for the mana crystal.

“Tch, the thing can dodge, huh?”

Hajime clicked his tongue in frustration. He'd planned to end it with one shot. But the instant he'd fired, the mana crystal had moved out of the way. It was clear the crystal was actively dodging attacks.

“Master, it seems this monster is similar to the Bachulum we fought in the oasis. That isn't a wall, but rather the body of a monster camouflaged as one.”

“Looks like it. Meaning... Everyone, watch out. Assume every part of the walls, ceiling, and floor is your enemy!”

Hajime's warning came not a moment too soon.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A pack of bipedal wolves was spat out from a section of the ice wall. Like the Frost Eagles, they were made of pure ice, aside from their glowing red eyes.

Each one was around two meters tall. Going off their appearance, Hajime decided to dub them Frost Werewolves. At the same time, more Frost Eagles swooped down from the ceiling, and the Frost Zombies the group had outrun finally caught up to the group. In seconds, the massive room was filled with three different kinds of ice monsters. There were hundreds—no, thousands of each.

And like the zombies, the Frost Eagles Hajime had shot down began regenerating. The large dome had been turned into a merciless arena where the gauntlet of enemies was neverending. Worst of all though, it seemed the monster controlling everything wasn't done yet. With a loud cracking noise, the part of the wall where the mana crystal sat started bulging outward. It was gathering all of the nearby ice to fortify its defenses.

Then, as if signaling the start of the fight, part of the wall transformed into a massive jaw and roared.

“Bwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The roar was so powerful it felt palpable.

“Omnibarrier.”

Yue instantly deployed a spatial magic barrier. A second later a huge shock ran through the invisible barrier that put even Hallowed Ground to shame. Space itself warped around the edges of the barrier, showing just how powerful an impact it had withstood. Outside the barrier stood a monster with the mana crystal embedded inside it. Crystal white breath spilled from its massive jaws. Each of its fangs was an arm-length icicle. The monster's body was so large that each step it took shook the ground. Its body was so clear and hard it seemed as though it was made of diamond, not ice. It was over twenty meters tall and had a huge shell on its back. Spines of ice protruded from the shell, protecting its rear. To Hajime, the monster vaguely resembled a turtle, but with six legs. In fact, it looked like a giant version of the Absod monsters the demons used. Chances were Freid had based them off of this monster, the Frost Turtle. He must have fought it to clear the labyrinth after all.

“Guess this trial's testing whether we can crack open that turtle's shell and smash its mana crystal before we get swallowed by a swarm of monsters.”

Despite how imposing the Frost Turtle looked, Hajime just casually shouldered Schlagen and glared at the beast. There was a feral gleam in his eyes. Kouki and the others paled when they saw what they were up against, but then calmed down somewhat when Hajime countered the Frost Turtle's imposing aura with his own Intimidation. As if to pay the turtle back for its earlier attack, Hajime unleashed a shockwave of pure mana that obliterated all of the nearby monsters. His attack caused even the Frost Turtle to take a step backward. In response, Hajime took a step forward.

In an attempt to prove it wasn't scared of some mere human, the Frost Turtle roared again. At the same time, the surrounding monsters began releasing waves of chilling frost.

"We'll handle the small fry. You guys take the turtle out."

Using his patented gun-kata style, Hajime started shooting through waves of monsters. Kouki and the others watched blankly, not realizing for a moment that Hajime was talking to them. But a moment later they realized his gaze was still fixed on them, even as he killed dozens of monsters with each shot of his revolvers. It appeared he really was planning on leaving the Frost Turtle to Kouki's group.

The realization took them by surprise. Considering how much Hajime and the Frost Turtle had been glaring at each other, they'd figured the two were about to duke it out.

"Don't give me that blank look. You finally have a chance to beat a boss monster. Didn't you want a chance to prove you're strong enough to conquer a labyrinth?"

"Oh. Yeah, that's right. We did!"

"Amanogawa's got the most firepower out of you four so the rest of you support him while he smashes its mana crystal. Meanwhile, we'll keep the other monsters out of your way. Though if you think it's too much and chicken out, I can take care of that guy for you too."

Hajime's lips curled up into a provocative sneer. Determination burning in his eyes, Kouki replied, "I don't need your pity! Just watch, I'll beat that thing down! Ryutarou, Shizuku, Suzu, let's do this!"

“Yeah, let’s beat that turtle to a pulp!”

“I’ve got your backs. Speaking of which, watch out for the spikes on that thing’s back. There’s likely more to them than meets the eye.”

“Leave defending to me, guys! I’ll protect you all!”

Realizing this was no time to be getting overwhelmed, Kouki and the others let out spirited yells. Just then, a beam of silver light shot out. It obliterated the monsters surrounding the Frost Turtle, clearing a path for Kouki and the others.

“You’ve got this, guys! But don’t push yourselves too hard!”

“Thanks, Kaori!”

Kouki dashed down the newly cleared path. But before he’d gone more than a few steps, the Frost Turtle’s eyes glowed menacingly. Seconds later, the destroyed monsters began regenerating much faster than usual. However, the Frost Turtle’s purpose wasn’t to bar Kouki and the others’ way. Its gaze was fixed squarely on Hajime. Clearly, it still believed that Hajime, not Kouki, was the real threat here.

“Hey, your opponent is me! Celestial Flash - Shatter!”

Frowning, Kouki unleashed his favorite attack to get the Frost Turtle’s attention. A huge blade of light shot out of Kouki’s sword, firing a tornado of shockwaves as it passed. The Frost Turtle didn’t move, and Kouki’s attack hit it in the eye. The main part of the attack crushed its eye, while the shockwaves expanded the wound.

“Braaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Having lost its eye and a good part of its head, the Frost Turtle screamed and turned its attention from Hajime to Kouki. It glared at Kouki with its one good eye, opened its maw, and shot out a breath attack. A tornado of wind hurtled toward Kouki, sharp fragments of ice swirling around inside it. Anyone hit by it would be frozen instantly. If they managed to avoid that, the shards of ice would still cut them to ribbons. However, Suzu wasn’t about to let either of those things happen to Kouki.

“Like a flowing stream, like a gentle breeze— Hallowed Ground - Dispersal!”

By tacking on an incantation, Suzu made her already powerful composite spell even stronger. A barrier of light enveloped Kouki, protecting him from the turtle's breath. A second after Suzu's barrier formed, the turtle's breath slammed into Kouki. He was thrust into a hell of howling gale and frigid ice. But Suzu's impenetrable barrier protected him from the elements. She'd grown strong enough to contend against even a labyrinth's boss-level monster. When she realized that, her lips naturally curled upward. Confidence welled up within her, and that confidence made her even more powerful. Safe within Suzu's barrier, Shizuku calmly assessed the situation.

"Its head and eye are already regenerating. I guess as long as that mana crystal's intact it can keep regenerating forever like everything else. We'll have to take it out in one go."

Can you do it? Shizuku asked silently with her gaze. Kouki nodded in response.

"Yeah, I'll finish it with Divine Wrath. But I need to fire it at full power, so you'll need to buy me thirty seconds."

"Roger. I won't let that oversized turtle lay a finger on you, Kouki."

Before, it had taken Kouki a full minute to chant the incantation for his trump card. Hearing it would only take half as much time now was reassuring. Ryutarou grinned and punched his gauntlets together.

"Everyone, the breath attack is fading!"

It was time to counterattack. Kouki held his sword aloft, and it began to glow with a dazzling light.

"Ryutarou, Shizuku, keep it busy for me. Suzu, stay close to me. I'm going to focus on my incantation."

"Roger! Hit it with a big one for us!"

Finally, the breath dispersed completely. A curtain of snow hung in the air, acting as a veil to temporarily obscure Kouki and the others from sight. Using the cover to their advantage, Shizuku and Ryutarou dashed forward toward the Frost Turtle. Shizuku was the faster of the two, and she burst out of the snow first, keeping her body low to the ground. Thanks to the poor visibility and Shizuku's natural speed, she was able to get close to the turtle without taking a

single attack. Ponytail fluttering in the breeze, Shizuku drew her katana in one fluid motion.

“Take this! Slice through—Flash Blitz!”

A short incantation accompanied Shizuku’s slice. In the blink of an eye, her sword was resheathed again with a satisfying clink. The only proof that she’d attacked at all was a black streak flashing through the air a moment later. The streak passed through one of the Frost Turtle’s right legs, warping space as it passed. The turtle’s thick, diamond-hard leg twisted unnaturally. Then, without any resistance at all, it fell off. Shizuku’s Flash Blitz sliced through space, so theoretically no material should be able to withstand it.

“Flash Blitz! Flash Blitz!”

Not content with a single leg, Shizuku darted forward, barely a blur in the snow. In less than a second, she’d circled around to the Frost Turtle’s rear. The only indication that she’d drawn her sword at all was the faint clink signifying its return to its sheath. And the turtle’s pained screams.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!?”

All three of its right legs had been sliced off. Its remaining legs couldn’t support its massive bulk. Groaning helplessly, the giant turtle leaned to one side, then crumpled onto the ground. Incensed, the Frost Turtle’s eyes gleamed with a vicious crimson light. It turned around to glare at Shizuku, determined to destroy the puny creature who’d brought it to its knees. The bloodlust coming off it was palpable, and Shizuku felt goosebumps rise on her arms.

“Ah!?”

Trusting in her instincts, she dived to one side. A moment later, countless spears of ice shot up from the ground she’d been standing on. The flat ice had turned into a deadly bloom of thorns.

“This’s as far as you go!”

Ryutarou burst out of the snow a second later and charged toward the Frost Turtle’s jaw. With a deafening war cry, he leaped off the ground with enough force to leave a crater and delivered a full-power uppercut. The force traveled all the way from the Frost Turtle’s jaw to the top of its head. Its jaw shattered

completely, sending shards of ice flying everywhere. However—

“Ngh, damn this thing’s tough!”

Despite Ryutarou’s attack, the turtle didn’t stop summoning ice spears from the ground. They continued chasing Shizuku wherever she ran. Eventually, she was forced to escape into the air using her Aerodynamic-enchanted boots. Another array of spears popped up right below her, nearly scraping her soles. But she still couldn’t relax—the Frost Turtle’s assault was far from over.

“Shizuku!”

She didn’t even have the leeway to register Ryutarou’s warning. Her attention was focused solely on the enemy trying to kill her. Unfortunately, the real threat was the three Frost Eagles swooping in on her from above. The turtle had orchestrated a pincer attack. Since it had created all these monsters, naturally it could control them remotely. It had in fact lured Shizuku into taking to the skies.

“Force—”

Realizing her mistake, Shizuku turned around and attempted to repel the eagles with Force Pulse. Her shockwave slices certainly did have the necessary power to bring down the Frost Eagles. But she’d reacted too late. *No, I won’t make it in time!* She would be able to avoid a fatal blow. Of that she was certain. But she’d still get hit by at least two of the three attacks. Even if she survived, she’d be gravely injured. Fear and grim determination warred within her mind.

Time slowed to a crawl. Her sword moved as though in slow-motion, and she could clearly see each of the talons about to rake her body from above and behind. But a moment before they reached her, three streaks of red light shot through the Frost Eagles. The impact destroyed them utterly, blowing them to pieces. The remaining shards of ice reflected the crimson light from the bullets’ shockwaves, making it look as though it were raining blood.

“*Cough, cough.* What the heck was—”

Coughing up ice particles, Shizuku watched on in awe. A second later, she realized what that attack must have been. Fixing her stance, she looked down at

where the streaks had come from, and as expected, saw Hajime. He was smack in the middle of a sea of enemies, but between his Cross Bits and Metzelei, not a single one was able to get close. Upon closer inspection, Shizuku noticed he had Donner in his right hand, and though his back was turned to her, its muzzle was pointing in her direction. Though it was obvious what he'd done, the impossibility of the feat caused Shizuku to gasp.

“How did he shoot so accurately from so far away, without even looking?”

There were countless monsters between him and Shizuku. At a glance, she counted twenty Frost Eagles alone. No matter how upgraded Hajime's weapons were, his bullets wouldn't have reached Shizuku if they'd had to penetrate through that many enemies. Even if they had, they would likely have their trajectories deflected somewhat, and therefore miss.

So how had Hajime managed to shoot the eagles around Shizuku? The answer was simple. He hadn't hit any other monsters. Meaning he had somehow fired all three bullets along a path that avoided every one of the twenty Frost Eagles in the way. He'd taken advantage of the spaces below their wings, between their legs, and above their necks. Not only had he pulled off such a feat, but he'd also done so without even looking behind him, while still fighting other monsters.

The word “amazing” didn't do his skills justice. They were well and truly godlike.

“You really are a reliable guy...”

Forgetting for a moment that she was on the battlefield, Shizuku just watched Hajime fight. But a second later, a loud yell brought her back to her senses.

“Don't get so full of yourself, fucker! Hammerfist!”

Ryutarou leaped into the sky, then used his Aerodynamic-enchanted boots to jump back downward in mid-air, falling toward the Frost Turtle like a meteor. He wasn't going to let it get any more attacks off. He activated one of his gauntlets' new abilities, and used gravity magic to amplify his punch's weight tenfold. That, plus the momentum gained from his fall gave his fist earth-shattering force. He really was like a comet hurtling toward the ground. The moment his steel gauntlet hit the turtle's head, the ground shook. A massive

shockwave blew away the nearby snow. The Frost Turtle's head was blown clean off from the impact, leaving just its neck behind. Confident that he'd stalled the turtle's attack, Ryutarou grinned and used the attack's recoil to do a backflip in the air. However, he'd miscalculated. He hadn't realized that the turtle had grown a new head from the stump of one of the legs Shizuku had cut off. Though it looked like a turtle, the monster was really the ice itself. It wasn't something that followed the laws of common sense.

"Geh!? Shit—"

The moment he landed, Ryutarou was met with another pair of glimmering crimson eyes. The newly-formed head opened its jaws and prepared to attack. Sensing the vast amount of mana and cold gathering within its mouth, Ryutarou hurriedly crossed his arms to guard his vitals. Dark green light enveloped his body. He was using Diamond Skin.

Is this gonna be enough? No, I'm gonna make it be enough! Scolding himself for his hesitation, Ryutarou steeled his resolve. The turtle unleashed its breath, intent on blowing Ryutarou away along with his resolve. But just before the breath hit, an orange, hexagonal shield slid into place in front of him. The force of the breath caused the barrier to crack almost instantly, but a moment later more barriers slid into place behind it.

"O-Oh? Is that your Heaven Crusher, Suzu?"

Surprised, Ryutarou turned around to see the tiny barrier master grinning at him. Behind her, Kouki was in the middle of his incantation. This was another one of her advanced composite light spells, Heaven Crusher - Barrier. Normally Heaven Crusher was used as a makeshift shield, or to push back enemies, but by combining it with Hallowed Ground, it had turned into a formidable barrier. This was one spell Suzu had specifically asked Hajime to put into her fans. Its versatility made it her favorite spell, so she'd wanted to have a stronger version available to use whenever she needed it. Adding that versatility to stronger spells was certainly an efficient way of using mana.

After a few seconds though, Suzu's grin transformed into a look of panic. Worried, Ryutarou turned back around. What he saw gave him a shock.

"Wha— there's two of them now!?"

Indeed there were. A second head had sprouted from the turtle's neck. Ryutarou had realized common sense didn't apply to this monster when a head had grown from its leg, but this still came as a surprise.

To make matters worse, Ryutarou still couldn't move because the first head's breath attack hadn't stopped. Suzu put a few more barriers down in front of Ryutarou in an attempt to prepare for the next attack. Since she'd devoted the bulk of her mana to protecting Kouki, she'd initially used Heaven Crusher - Barrier to cut down on mana expenditure, but that decision had backfired on her. *If I'd known this was going to happen I would have used a more powerful barrier to begin with!* She was worried even multi-layered Heaven Crushers wouldn't be enough for this. Fortunately, she didn't need to find out. Hajime wasn't the only overpowered monster on the battlefield. The moment the Frost Turtle opened its second mouth, a massive dragon made of lightning flew in from the side and bit it clean off. The dragon's roar sounded just like the Frost Turtle's.

"Whoa, wh-what was that for..."

The lightning dragon circled around, grazing Ryutarou as it passed, then returned to its owner. Ryutarou twitched from the static discharge as the dragon's tail swept past him. Embarrassed, he grumbled to himself to hide his earlier reaction. As he watched the lightning dragon go, he noticed Yue was looking over at him. Even though there was no way she should have been able to hear his grumbling, he was still worried she somehow had. She gave him a curt nod, then moved her fingers like a conductor's baton, controlling seven lightning dragons at once. Dense as he was, even Ryutarou could tell what Yue was trying to say.

"Don't let your guard down." Scratching his head awkwardly, Ryutarou grinned ruefully.

"Hah, I just can't compare to those guys."

The turtle's breath was finally starting to weaken. This time Ryutarou stayed alert for follow-up attacks as he readied his next move. Just as the breath petered out, the barriers protecting Ryutarou vanished. He charged forward, kicking off the ground with all his might.

“God, I’m jealous of them!” he shouted as he launched a Death Fist at the turtle’s leg-head. But despite his words, Ryutarou didn’t look the least bit annoyed. In fact, he was positively cheerful. He would never admit it to anyone, but he was feeling more energized than usual, knowing he had reliable allies like Yue to back him up. Nor would he ever admit that he’d fallen for Yue the moment he’d seen her imposing and beautiful figure controlling a fire dragon back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. After all, he’d seen her flirting with Hajime the minute after, so his love had withered the moment it arrived. But that was something he wouldn’t tell anyone, not even Kouki.

“Guess I’m a moron too for sticking with them though!”

Upon seeing how attached Hajime and Yue were to each other, Ryutarou had just given up. He hadn’t even felt jealous. Though that didn’t stop him from being happy whenever Yue acknowledged his existence. However, the last thing he wanted was to disappoint her, so he kicked it up a notch and made sure to remain vigilant. He unleashed a flurry of blows that resembled a karate form, keeping his attention focused solely on the enemy in front of him. Meanwhile, Shizuku once again ran around chopping off the turtle’s legs, ruining its balance.

Though the Frost Turtle could regenerate indefinitely, the two were succeeding in keeping it busy, which was all they were after. Finally, after a half-minute that seemed like ages, Kouki was ready.

“Shizuku, Ryutarou, get back!”

“Roger!”

“I’ve been waiting for this!”

A spiral of white light rose up from Kouki’s body. His sword was glowing bright as a star, a staggering amount of mana gathered at its tip. This was Kouki’s trump card. His strongest attack.

“Take this you damned monster— Divine Wrath!”

Divine Wrath was the strongest light spell in existence, an attack that exemplified god’s wrath. Kouki swung his sword down, unleashing the cluster of condensed mana.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”



The Frost Turtle screamed as its shell was obliterated. Though it managed to avoid being cut entirely in two, Kouki's attack wasn't over yet. Divine Wrath wasn't a slashing attack, but rather a bombardment. Kouki pointed the tip of his sword at the Frost Turtle and the mana pouring off it turned from a blade of light into a cannon of light. White annihilating light ripped through the turtle.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

Kouki unleashed a powerful yell. The air around him trembled. Any part of the ground caught in his attack was gouged out, and the room was filled with blinding white light. It looked as though a mini-sun had just formed, with Kouki at the center.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The Frost Turtle roared in desperation. A second later it retracted its head into its body and formed a conical ice shield around itself. It was clear the turtle was getting desperate. The conical shield did manage to mitigate Divine Wrath's power somewhat, but it was hardly enough to change the inevitable outcome. Not only was this the legendary hero's strongest attack, but it had also been enhanced by the world's greatest Synergist. The turtle's shield cracked, then shattered under the pressure. No matter how densely packed its ice, it just melted like Icarus' wings in the face of Kouki's holy sun. White smoke rose from the turtle's body as its ice evaporated. But the Frost Turtle's greatest asset was its ability to use surrounding ice to regenerate its body. This was now a contest to see whether its regeneration could outheal the damage Kouki was delivering.

"Just disappear already! I need more power goddamiiiiiiiiit!" Kouki screamed desperately as he watched the Frost Turtle start weathering his attack. This was the utmost power Kouki could bring out at once. If this wasn't enough to kill the turtle, it would just prove he still wasn't strong enough to handle a labyrinth.

That alone was the one thing he was absolutely, utterly, unwilling to accept. He had to defeat this enemy using his own strength, no matter what. Otherwise, the negative feelings that had been building up within him ever since his reunion with Hajime would overflow. As if trying to prove that he really was in the right, that the situation he feared wasn't reality, Kouki pressed

forward.

“Kouki-kun...”

Suzu was a little frightened by the way Kouki looked. However, Kouki was too focused to notice Suzu’s voice or her gaze.

“Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Kouki and the Frost Turtle’s final screams collided. A second later, there was an earsplitting crack. More followed, and the Frost Turtle was soon covered in a series of spiderweb cracks. Pieces of its body fell to the ground, its life all but shaved away. Then finally—

“Gaaaaaaah!?”

With one last roar, the Frost Turtle was swallowed up by the light. Kouki’s Divine Wrath pierced right through it and bore into the wall behind it. Unable to support its own weight, the Frost Turtle split in half, down the same crack the slash portion of Kouki’s Divine Wrath had created and collapsed in on itself. At the same time, the white light faded away, signaling the end of the battle.

The Frost Turtle’s remains lay scattered on the ground, unmoving. It didn’t look like it was going to be regenerating again.

“I-I did it... Haaah... Haaah... I beat it... I really...”

Panting, Kouki stared at the Frost Turtle’s remains in awe. His legs slumped underneath him, and Suzu hurriedly caught him before he fell.

“Kouki-kun, are you al—”

Ignoring the dangerous aura she’d sensed from him earlier, Suzu worriedly called out to him. But before she could finish her sentence, the Frost Turtle’s broken body exploded. Or rather, a single Frost Eagle emerged from within it, making it seem as though its body had blown apart.

“Wha... Why’re there still moving enemies!?”

Kouki’s exhausted eyelids flew open, and Suzu shouted, “Kouki-kun, look over there!” in a panicked voice. She pointed to the Frost Eagle’s talons, which held

the monster's mana crystal.

"Dammit! I didn't destroy it!" Kouki shouted angrily. It seemed the Frost Turtle had realized it couldn't withstand Kouki's Divine Wrath, and so had transferred its mana crystal into a Frost Eagle that it had hidden inside the ground. It truly was a tough, crafty monster. While it was normal for monsters of the labyrinth to be this resilient, Kouki wasn't in the mood to praise its abilities. *This can't be happening.*

"You're not getting away! Celestial— Gah!"

"Kouki-kun!"

Kouki tried to finish the eagle off with his favorite spell, but he was too exhausted to even swing his sword. Hajime had enhanced Kouki's Sacred Armor to absorb mana from the nearby surroundings to replenish his reserves when he got low, but that would still take another ten seconds or so. And right now, they didn't have that kind of time. The Frost Eagle was already gathering nearby ice to transform into a Frost Turtle. If it managed to reach one of the walls, everything Kouki and the others had worked for would be undone. They'd have to do the fight all over again.

"Kouki-kun, it's alright! Don't push yourself!"

Suzu desperately tried to hold Kouki back, but like a man possessed, he kept struggling.

"I can do it too... I'm just as capable... No more capable than Nagumo... I'm the one who's right... It's me..."

But no matter how strong his determination was, Kouki could only muster a meager amount of strength. Seeing as he couldn't gather any mana, Kouki decided to try something else. *If this is my limit, then I've just gotta surpass it! That's why I've got this skill, isn't it!?*

"Limit—"

"Kouki-kun, listen to me!"

Suzu clung to Kouki, screaming in his ears. Lack of mana was something he could recover from within a few seconds, but if he used Limit Break he'd be out

of commission for much longer. Not even healing magic could fix the exhaustion that came from using Limit Break. Of course, restoration magic could, but that would require Hajime or one of the others to use up a lot of mana. Granted, at this point that would hardly be a dent in their total mana pool. That being said, it still wasn't a trump card to use when not actually necessary. And right now, there was no need for Kouki to push himself that far. Since he wasn't in this fight alone.

“Carve out a path— Force Pulse!”

Shizuku suddenly appeared at the Frost Eagle's side and swung her katana down. Though she swung only once, multiple streaks of light shot toward the eagle, which was trying to escape into the ice wall. They made mincemeat out of the eagle before it could gather any ice to defend itself. The mana crystal dropped from its shredded talons.

“Shatter - Shock Slugger!”

Shizuku spun around using the force of her swing and smashed her sheath into the falling mana crystal. Dark blue mana spread out from the point of impact, rattling the sturdy crystal. Shock Slugger was a special move that Hajime had imbued into Shizuku's sheath. It converted all the mana poured into the sheath into powerful shockwaves. Those shockwaves tore through the mana crystal, cracking it in multiple places.

“Gale!”

Shizuku then dealt the final blow with a roundhouse kicking, shattering the crystal entirely. Crimson fragments rained from the sky. At the same time, all of the other monsters in the room crumbled to the ground. They were nothing more than lifeless chunks of ice now and shattered at even the slightest touch.

“.....” Kouki watched on, dumbfounded. Suzu gave him a worried look, but he didn't notice. A boisterous laugh broke the silence.

“Hahahahahaha! We did it, Kouki! We won!”

“Huh? Oh, Ryutarou...”

“Why the long face, man? We won! You should be happy! But man, your Divine Wrath is fucking insane! It was already insane before, but now it's even

more insane.”

Though his vocabulary was somewhat lacking, Ryutarou was honestly impressed. He slapped Kouki on the back good-naturedly. Seeing his best friend in such high spirits helped clear away some of the dark thoughts intruding onto Kouki’s consciousness, and his expression softened a little.

“Yeah, you’re right. I, no we won. We beat a labyrinth monster!”

“Hell yeah! It feels so good to finally pound something down. We kept getting our asses handed to us before!”

“Haha... I certainly do feel a little refreshed now.”

“See? We’re gonna catch up to Nagumo in no time!”

“I sure hope so...”

Kouki thanked Suzu for lending him her shoulder, then stepped away and stood on his own two feet. He smiled faintly, his spirits bolstered somewhat by Ryutarou’s cheerfulness. But he was still frustrated that even his trump card hadn’t been enough to completely destroy the Frost Turtle.

“Shizuku...”

Shizuku landed gracefully beside the party. Kouki nearly shot her an accusatory glare, but then realized what he was doing and quickly smoothed his expression over.

“Hm? Good job, Kouki.”

Shizuku didn’t fail to notice Kouki’s strange behavior, but she didn’t want to ruin the celebratory mood so she didn’t mention it. Instead, she thanked him with a smile. Using all of his willpower, Kouki forced his own lips into a smile and replied, “Yeah, you too, Shizuku. That follow-up at the end was amazing.”

“Really? I think your Divine Wrath was more amazing... It was way stronger than I expected.”

“Yeah, totally! It was awesome!”

“W-Well, I just...”

Shizuku downplayed her own achievement and did her best to praise Kouki.

Sounding almost desperate, Suzu quickly added her own accolades in the hopes of improving Kouki's mood. Hearing all this praise from two pretty girls made him blush, and he scratched his cheek awkwardly. Looking at the objective destruction his Divine Wrath had wrought helped convince him that maybe they were right. Behind him, Hajime called out, "Oiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! Celebrate all you want later. It's time to go!"

Turning around, Kouki saw Hajime seated atop a mountain of ice, Metzelei resting on his shoulder. Judging by the size of the ice mountain, he'd likely slaughtered thousands of monsters all on his own. Despite that, he wasn't even breathing hard. In fact, he looked like he'd just been out for a stroll in the park. Next to him, Yue and the others looked just as nonchalant.

Hajime put Metzelei back in his Treasure Trove and pointed off to the side. Kouki turned around again and saw an arch-shaped hole in one section of the wall that definitely hadn't been there before. It seemed defeating the Frost Turtle had opened the path forward. Kouki and the others nodded and dashed over to where Hajime was waiting.

"Congrats. That was a pretty tough fight... but it looks like you guys can handle boss-level monsters inside labyrinths now."

Kouki and the others' jaws dropped open. They weren't used to hearing praise coming out of his mouth. They stared at Hajime like he was some kind of rare animal. Annoyed, Hajime narrowed his eyes dangerously, so Shizuku hurriedly said, "Yeah, I guess we managed. Also... thanks, Nagumo-kun."

"Huh? What for?"

"You helped us out, didn't you? When you sniped those eagles earlier... Well, those shots were so accurate they sent shivers down my spine."

"Really?"

"Really. I've been thinking this for a while, Nagumo-kun, but are you sure you don't secretly have two jobs? There's no way your only job is a non-combat one. Are you sure you don't also have the Gunner job?"

"Don't be stupid, a job like that doesn't even exist... When humans have their backs against the wall, they're capable of pulling off miracles, that's all."

Hajime's eyes glazed over as he thought back to his traumatic experiences. Shizuku gave him a look that was half sympathy, half admiration, then turned to Yue. She was grinning proudly as Ryutarou thanked her for saving his life.

"By the way Nagumo, you sure you should have let us beat that thing?" Kouki interjected, his tone brusque. Hajime didn't particularly mind the change in topic and he replied, "Hm? Are you worried we won't get recognized as worthy conquerors of the labyrinth?"

"Yeah."

"I think we're fine, considering what the theme of this labyrinth is."

"What do you mean by that?"

Kouki cocked his head to the side, and Hajime turned to Tio to make sure his guess was right. She nodded, then explained, "During that previous fight, we faced sub-zero temperatures, an army of infinitely regenerating monsters, and a powerful guardian controlling them all. But powerful monsters exist within Orcus' labyrinth as well. I highly doubt the Liberators would have created labyrinths with overlapping purposes, so I suspect the Frost Caverns' true test lies up ahead."

"I agree with Tio. Everything up till now was just to see if we were even worth the labyrinth's time. Whether we have the minimum ability necessary to even clear it. After all, beating these monsters wasn't hard. I figured it wasn't a very important part of the trial."

"Besides, all of us killed at least a few hundred monsters each."

"Since we were able to overwhelm an army like that, I'm sure we won't be disqualified on the power front."

"Mmm... So don't worry."

All the evidence pointed to Tio's conjecture being correct. Furthermore, Hajime and the others had suppressed the massive army of monsters with consummate ease. Besides, Hajime and the others had far more experience conquering labyrinths, so Kouki couldn't really refute them. Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou all nodded, impressed by Tio's deduction, but Kouki once again felt a wave of negative emotions well up. Despite having defeated the powerful Frost

Turtle, he felt like the gap between him and Hajime was growing, not shrinking. Knowing he couldn't let these emotions out, Kouki bottled them up deep inside and nodded as well.

“Amanogawa, how're your mana reserves doing?”

“Fine. I drank a mana potion so I should be good.”

Kouki smiled, pretending as if everything was fine. Shizuku could tell his smile was faked and opened her mouth to say something. But she couldn't find the right words, and in the end, she just stood there until it was time to depart. The group left the devastated battlefield behind and walked into the dark corridor. Ignoring the inner turmoil of one of their party members, they struck out into the unknown future.

Chapter II: Whispers

The next segment of the labyrinth was, perhaps fittingly, a maze. The party looked down at the winding paths that spread out before them. The corridor that had opened up upon defeating the Frost Turtle had led the party to a terrace that overlooked the magnificent maze below. They stopped in their tracks, their breath taken away by the sight. That was how big and imposing the maze below was.

From what they could see, the maze was at least one kilometer in length. Past that, everything was covered in a fog of snow, so there was no telling how far it actually extended. Considering the maze was four kilometers wide, it seemed a safe bet to guess it went that far in length too. This was clearly the second part of their trial.

“Hmm. It seems pointless to map out this maze when we cannot see what lies beyond the snow.”

“Besides, it’d take forever to memorize all the paths in a maze as twisted as this one.”

“Indeed. Moreover, it seems foolish to rely on memory when we have the compass.”

Hajime’s compass was defeating the purpose of a lot of these trials. Tio smiled ruefully, and Hajime returned her smile. “But still...” he muttered, “That Freid guy managed to clear this maze even without the compass... I don’t even want to think about how long he spent wandering down there. I’ve gotta say, that guy’s got guts.”

Even Hajime was impressed by the tenacity of the demon general who’d cleared this labyrinth before them, Freid Bagwa. Yue turned to him and said, “Hajime... Don’t praise him. You’ll catch his ugly.”

“She’s right, Hajime-san. I bet he just had his army search for him while he sat back. That bastard disgusts me!”

“Just how much do you two hate that guy? I’m honestly kinda impressed he managed to piss you off that much.”

Rage glimmered in Yue and Shea’s eyes as they thought back to the many times Freid had managed to give them the slip. Somehow or the other, he always came out alive. Their hatred for him was almost palpable. There weren’t many people that could bring out this much rage in Yue or Shea. Kouki and the others backed away from the two girls, terrified, and Hajime shooed them onward. At the end of the terrace was a spiral staircase made of ice that wound down to the maze’s entrance. Another arch adorned the top of the staircase. As they started their descent, Ryutarou—who hated doing things the roundabout way—grumbled, “Even if we know the right way, do we really have to go through this stupid maze? It’s gonna detour us a bunch, can’t we just blast through the fucking thing?”

“We can’t, Ryutarou. This is part of the trial. Just be glad we won’t get lost at least.”

“Yeah, but Kouki...”

“Fufu, you always did hate puzzles and mazes, Ryutarou. Every time you tried one you’d get fed up in a few minutes and throw it down.”

“Oh, I remember that. That’s why I stopped doing puzzles in front of you. Since you’d get annoyed and break my puzzles too.”

Ryutarou frowned, and both Shizuku and Kouki laughed at him. Ryutarou’s expression grew even sourer as his childhood friends teased him. Seeing him sulk, even Kaori and Suzu started laughing. When they reached the bottom of the staircase, Ryutarou glared at the maze’s entrance like it was his mortal enemy. A second later a lightbulb went on in his head.

“I just thought of something! Look! There’s nothing covering the top of the maze! We can just fly right over it, can’t we!? Hehe, Nagumo, looks like we won’t need that compass of yours!”

His plan was as good as his wit.

“Sakagami, you really don’t get it...”

Ryutarou ignored Hajime’s exasperated sigh and shouted, “I’m a genius!” He

activated his boots' Aerodynamic and shot into the air. The phrase "look before you leap" was one he would have done well to study. Unfortunately, the only phrases Ryutarou knew were "strike while the iron's hot," and "no time like the present."

"Ryutarou!?"

"M-Moron! Get back here!"

"R-Ryutarou-kun!"

Kouki, Shizuku, and Suzu all tried to stop him from acting on his hasty plan. The last labyrinth had made it clear to them that such simple tricks would never work. Kouki reached out to grab Ryutarou's shoulder, but unfortunately, the muscleheaded brawler was too fast. Kouki's hand swiped only air. Ryutarou was easily distracted by carrots dangled in front of him, which probably contributed to his lack of thinking this through. His ability to remain optimistic about anything and everything was both a strength and weakness, but because of how often he went overboard there were more cons to it than pros. And in a labyrinth, such hastiness led to death.

"Now then, let's see what happens... Sakagami's willing to make an example of himself, so it'd be a waste not to."

"Nagumo!?"

Kouki glared reproachfully at Hajime, who folded his arms and watched calmly. However, Hajime hadn't brought Kouki and the others with him so he could babysit them. They were Kaori's childhood friends so he wasn't going to just abandon them. But he had no obligation to look out for someone too stupid to think about what he was doing. Realizing that, Kouki turned to Suzu and shouted, "Suzu, block him off with a barrier!" Suzu hurriedly raised her fans, but it was too late.

"Ooooooi! What're you guys waiting for? Hurry up and get over—"

Ryutarou looked over his shoulder just as he crossed the maze's invisible boundary. There was a sharp keening noise, and the space above the maze warped.

"Whoa!?"

With a brief shout, Ryutarou disappeared.

“Ryutarou!?”

“Oh, jeez! That idiot!”

“What do we do, Nagumo-kun!? Ryutarou-kun disappeared!”

Kouki, Shizuku, and Suzu started to panic. Suzu turned to Hajime in tears and begged him to help. But he was focused on parsing the information his Demon Eye was giving him, and he didn’t give any indication that he’d heard her. Basically, he ignored her.

The moment space had warped around Ryutarou, Hajime had sensed the movement of mana. A second later he sensed another flash of mana out of the corner of his eye and turned toward it. There he saw a hexagonal prism of ice jutting out from the ceiling. The same space-warping phenomenon occurred again, and suddenly Ryutarou appeared inside the prism of ice.

“There, huh?”

Kouki and the others followed Hajime’s gaze, then gasped when they saw Ryutarou frozen within the ice, serving as an example to others who attempted such folly.

“Normally it’s cute girls who’re trapped in ice, not burly dudes. No one asked for this.”

“This isn’t the time to be talking about anime tropes!”

Yeah, I guess not.

“— Ah!?”

“Ah, Ryutarou-kun’s still conscious!”

He couldn’t move, but it seemed he could still change his expression. From the looks of it, he was desperately trying to tell his comrades something. His mouth twisted in pain, and it looked as though he was being choked. At this rate, he’d die in another two minutes.

“Ryutarou, your gauntlets! Use the shockwaves from your gauntlets!”

Kouki gestured wildly, but Ryutarou was too far away and panicking far too

much to understand what Kouki was trying to tell him. It was understandable. Before he knew it his vision had gone dark, then he'd found himself trapped in ice. Unfortunately, panicking only caused him to run out of air faster. Then, because all labyrinths loved overkill, dozens of razor-sharp pillars of ice appeared from the ceiling.

"O-Oh shit..."

"This is definitely..."

"Awawawah, I'll put up a barrier!"

Naturally, the pillars were all aimed toward Ryutarou. Kouki, Shizuku, and Suzu turned pale. Suzu hurriedly tried to erect a barrier, but the ceiling was a good five hundred meters up. Even with all her training, she would have a hard time putting it in the right spot.

"Hmm, even if you left the victim alone they'd suffocate anyway... so why's the labyrinth going to the extra effort of stabbing them with spears?"

"Mmm... To punish people who break the rules? You know, to show how scary your death is or something?"

"Can you stop analyzing for a minute and save him!?"

On the verge of tears, Shizuku begged Hajime and Yue to save Ryutarou. Unable to watch Shizuku suffer any longer, Kaori gently patted her shoulder and said, "Shizuku-chan. Those ice spears are probably a failsafe in case whoever gets captured breaks out. As long as Ryutarou-kun's inside, they won't attack him."

"That's just a guess, you don't know that for—"

"Besides, everything'll be fine, Shizuku-chan!"

"Kaori?"

Kaori sounded surprisingly confident. However, Shizuku was still worried Ryutarou was about to be turned into a pincushion. She looked from him to Kaori, then back at him. Kaori brought her hands to her chest and said cutely, "Even if he dies, as long as we get to him fast enough, we can just bring him back, like we did me!"

“That’s not the problem here!”

The old Kaori would have done everything in her power to save Ryutarou. Has love really changed you this much? Is the old, kind Kaori I knew gone forever? Shizuku lamented to herself. Kaori was right. As long as one could use spirit magic and restoration magic, they could bring back anyone who’d died within the past few minutes. However, doing so was a long and arduous process. When Kaori had died, it had taken Yue and Tio five whole days to revive her. Now that they had some experience, they could probably revive people faster, but it would still take an ungodly amount of mana. Spending several days and depleting a large amount of the mana stored in their jewelry just to revive Ryutarou would be a waste of time and resources. And so, after a brief glance over at Shizuku and the others, who looked stunned by Kaori’s statement, Hajime pulled Kaori back and turned to Yue. Both Yue and Kaori understood what he was after, and they nodded in tandem. Yue sighed, shrugged her shoulders, then extended a hand toward the hexagon encasing Ryutarou.

“Cosmic Rift.”

Yue opened a portal in front of Kaori. Its corresponding exit was shimmering a few meters away from the hexagon.

“We really have to do something about this bad habit of Ryutarou-kun’s.”

Frowning, Kaori flapped her wings, sending a barrage of silver feathers through the portal. They flew out the other end and stuck to the hexagon’s outer layer of ice. From there, Kaori’s disintegration did its work. In less than a second, the hexagon had been melted away. But the labyrinth wasn’t going to let its prey escape that easily. The countless ice spears shot forward, intent on skewering Ryutarou.

“Oh no you don’t!”

Kaori turned her palm upside-down and made a fist as if grabbing the remains of Ryutarou’s hexagon prison. A second later, the remaining feathers started whirling around, creating a protective cocoon around Ryutarou. Anything that touched the cocoon was disintegrated, making it the perfect shield. In the past, Hajime had needed his railgun-accelerated pile bunker to break through such a barrier. So it stood to reason that a measly array of ice pillars stood no chance.

As Hajime watched the spears of ice shoot toward their own oblivion, he casually turned to Kaori and suggested, “Kaori. While you’re disintegrating all those pillars, disintegrate that moron’s balls while you’re at it.”

This was a new form of ball-crushing that only Kaori could do. It seemed Hajime was quite miffed that Ryutarou had wasted their time.

“Nagumo, how can you even say that!?”

Kouki cut in before Kaori could respond. He covered his own crotch protectively and shivered in terror. “You’re a man too, don’t you have any pity!?” he screamed. Even Shizuku and Suzu, who’d breathed sighs of relief when Kaori had saved Ryutarou, winced sympathetically. Everyone waited with bated breath to see whether or not today would mark the birth of a new eunuch. Blushing, Kaori replied, “H-His balls? I-I can’t do that! Hajime-kun, you pervert!”

For some reason Kaori wasn’t terrified by the prospect of crushing Ryutarou’s balls, but rather embarrassed. While she was hesitating for the wrong reasons, Yue said coldly, “How would disintegrating his balls be perverted? Kaori, you try and make everything more sexual than it is. You’re the real pervert.”

“N-No I’m not, Yue! If I wanted to disintegrate his balls I’d have to touch them with my feathers, right? That’s the same as me indirectly touching them! That’s totally perverted!”

“Say what you want, it doesn’t change the fact that you’re too excitable over a pair of balls. Pervert.”

“You just want to frame me as a pervert, Yue! I don’t have any interest in balls!”

“Oh? Not even in Hajime’s?”

“Ah!? W-Well, how do I put this... Uh, m-maybe a little...”

“Mmm... So you really are a pervert obsessed with balls. Grandmaster of ball smashing.”

“Hey, that’s mean! You take that back! Hajime-kun! I swear I’m not a pervert who’s obsessed with balls! Please believe me!”

“Uh sure. I believe you, so can we just drop this? I feel bad for even bringing it up now. Also, stop saying balls over and over, both of you. Just look, Kaori. Your friends are all feeling awkward because of your guys’ weird argument.”

Chastised, Kaori looked over at Kouki and the others. As Hajime had said, they all looked extremely uncomfortable.

“I can’t believe the pure and innocent Kaori would...” Kouki muttered, pointedly not meeting Kaori’s gaze.

Meanwhile, Suzu was blushing bright red. “Kaorin, I never knew you were so perverted...” she whispered to herself. On the other hand, Shizuku’s expression was hard to decipher. It was a mixture of sadness and happiness, the kind of gentle expression a mother has when she sees her daughter’s all grown up.

Kaori shivered. *At this rate, even my friends will think I’m a pervert who’s obsessed with balls!* Panicking, she attempted to clear her name.

“Listen, everyone! I’m not—”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!? Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Unfortunately, she was interrupted by a scream from above. More specifically, Ryutarou’s scream. Looking up, the party saw that the spears of ice had been destroyed, and only Kaori’s shimmering silver cocoon remained. Hajime and the others instantly realized why Ryutarou was screaming. Coming back to her senses, Kaori looked up and said, “Huh? Ah! R-Ryutarou-kun, I’m sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

She quickly dispersed her cocoon. As expected, Ryutarou’s clothes had been shredded, and he looked half-dead. Kaori had been so busy trying to convince people she wasn’t a pervert that she’d forgotten to cancel her ability after the hexagon had completely melted, and a few stray feathers had hit Ryutarou. As he fell limply to the floor Suzu shouted, “Wawawah, oh no! Luminous Mesh!” A net of light appeared underneath Ryutarou to catch him. The net swiftly brought him down to the others, but when they saw what he looked like, they shrieked.

“N-Nooo, Ryutarou-kun you pervert!”

Suzu hadn’t intended to say that, but she blurted it out when she saw what he

looked like. She was so shocked that she lost the concentration to maintain her Luminous Mesh, and Ryutarou fell unceremoniously to the floor.

“Ryutarou... Poor guy.”

The words “poor guy” did not do justice to the shape Ryutarou was in. His clothes had been shredded so badly that he was practically nude. The area around his crotch had suffered the most. Though his balls were fortunately intact, the clothes covering them were anything but. His nether region was on full display for all to see. No one wanted to see a musclehead in the nude, and so they all averted their gaze. In fact, they averted more than that and turned around entirely. The last thing anyone wanted was to see Ryutarou’s dick. Or experience it with any of their other senses, for that matter.

“Amanogawa, you’re his friend aren’t you?” Hajime asked. The unsaid implication was of course that Kouki should be the one to do something about this. However, not even Kouki wanted any part of this. He looked pointedly in the other direction and replied, “I’m busy guarding Ryutarou, so someone else will have to help him!”

Kaori kept as far a distance from Ryutarou as she could while she reached out to cast a healing spell on him. Her eyes were shut tight, and she was looking in the opposite direction as if to prove just how little interest she had in Ryutarou’s balls.

“Kaori, you’re horrible... You’re the one who made him like this.”

“I only got distracted because you kept insulting me, Yue!”

“Mmm... Don’t blame this on me. Now take responsibility for your mistake, Kaori. Face the patient properly when you’re healing him!”

“N-No! I don’t want to see it! I don’t want to see anyone’s but Hajime-kun’s!”

“You’re a disgrace to healers everywhere. Now, look. Look at who you’re healing! Imprint the balls of a man other than Hajime’s into your brain forever!”

“Noooooooooooo! Stop it! I hate you, Yue! Stop pushing me! Aaah!? Is that gravity magic!? Stop! Don’t force my eyes opeeeeeeen!”

Yue pushed Kaori toward Ryutarou while using extremely precise gravity

magic to slowly force Kaori's eyelids open. The fact that she was able to avoid harming Kaori while still achieving what she wanted over such a small area proved just how much of a genius Yue was with magic. Unfortunately, Yue tended to use her skills for the most inane things.

"Yue-san and Kaori-san really get along."

"It seems more to me as though Yue simply enjoys one-sidedly teasing Kaori... but I must admit there is some truth in what you say."

"That's just their way of showing affection. You know what they say, good friends fight all the time and all that."

Tio, Shea, and Hajime commented on the nature of Yue and Kaori's relationship as they watched the two bicker. Hajime's expression was surprisingly gentle. Yue normally tried to act mature, but whenever she was around Kaori, she let her childish side out. Even now, there was a playful, innocent smile on Yue's lips. In a way, Yue's bond with Kaori was even deeper than it was with Shea, who she considered her best friend. Of course, Hajime loved the mature, doting side of Yue too, but this childish side of Yue had its own allure for him. Granted, when it came to Yue, any side of her was perfect as far as Hajime was concerned. Meanwhile, Ryutarou was still lying unconscious on the floor, his privates still completely uncovered. He'd been completely forgotten. Not only had he been unilaterally rejected by his childhood friend, but the girl he'd fallen for at first sight was also treating his existence like some kind of punishment game. This was undoubtedly the saddest moment of his seventeen years of life.

"I guess this is punishment enough, huh...?"

"How horrible..."

"Ryutarou... I'm sorry. I couldn't save you."

Shizuku, Suzu, and Kouki all offered Ryutarou words of sympathy. But even so, they refused to look at him as well.

Five minutes later, Ryutarou was awake and clothed. Kouki had generously donated some of his spare clothes to Ryutarou before he regained consciousness, so at the very least, he'd been spared the ignominy of waking up

to find his balls exposed. He apologized profusely for his recklessness, but instead of the lecture he'd been expecting, all he got were pitying looks.

"Hey, Kouki. What the hell happened while I was out?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing you need to worry about, Ryutarou!"

Kouki was determined to spare his best friend any further pain. In a beautiful display of friendship, he lied to Ryutarou's face. Sadly his efforts were in vain. Hajime was merciless.

"Until like a minute ago you were lying unconscious on the ground with your balls exposed."

"!?"

"Nagumoooooooo!? Why'd you have to go and tell him that!?" Kouki advanced threateningly toward Hajime while Ryutarou absorbed this bombshell. Looking around, he noticed the girls were all avoiding his gaze. Realizing this was no joke, he fell to all fours, defeated. Clouds darker than the one Yue called forth to summon her Draconic Thunder gathered around him. This was the first time the cheerful Ryutarou had ever been this depressed. He'd been utterly crushed, more crushed than someone flattened with gravity magic. Hajime pushed Kouki aside and replied, "Idiots like Sakagami learn from lessons if those lessons are accompanied with pain."

"But this is too much! You could at least punish him more tactfully next time, couldn't you!?"

"You just didn't have the guts to tell him the truth, so I did. Why do I have to sugarcoat shit for him?"

While Hajime was arguing with Kouki, Tio benevolently cast spirit magic on Ryutarou. Pale light descended on him, soothing his soul and inviting it to paradise. Hajime watched out of the corner of his eye, then brushed Kouki off and turned to Yue.

"Yue, just in case we need to use the sky, do you think you could counter that forced teleportation?"

"Probably not... It activates faster than I can cast. Also, I don't know how

much space it covers, or how quickly it can recast if blocked. If I tried to counter the activation of spatial magic across the entire maze, it would take too much mana.”

“Yeah, I figured as much. In that case...”

Hajime took Schlagen out of his Treasure Trove. Kouki and the others watched blankly as he started charging it. Sparks ran down its length as Hajime pointed it at one of the walls and fired. From up above, he’d estimated that the maze’s walls were about ten meters tall, and two meters thick. Easily thin enough for Schlagen or Orkan to blast through them. As expected, Hajime’s anti-material rifle was able to punch right through the wall, and a few others behind it too. However, the labyrinth never made things easy. Less than a second after Hajime’s bullet passed through, ice reformed around the hole, repairing the wall. It recovered much faster than any of the ice monsters they’d fought.

“Well, figures they’d prepare countermeasures for obvious strategies like blasting through all the walls.”

“Hajime-kun, I’m not sure that counts as an obvious strategy. At least on Earth, no one would try to beat a maze like that. They’d get arrested.”

Kaori had recently started leaving behind the common sense she’d learned on Earth, but it looked like it hadn’t vanished completely. Somehow or the other, it was still hanging on by a thread. In a sense, Hajime was no different from Ryutarou in the sense that he’d tried to invalidate the point of the maze. Kouki and the others all glared at him. Wary of a counterattack, Hajime ignored both Kaori’s helpful advice and Kouki and the others’ glares. After making sure none was coming, he put Schlagen back.

“Looks like we only get hit with the penalty if we actually try and *move* through the maze illegally. Meaning we can exploit the grey area of the rules.”

You have the compass, can’t we just proceed normally!? Kouki thought, his glare growing sharper. Ignoring him, Hajime casually strolled through the arch marking the beginning of the maze. Kouki and the others tensed nervously. Even though they knew it was probably fine, what had happened to Ryutarou had them all wary. They prepared for something to happen the moment the

maze was breached.

“How is it, Nagumo-kun? Are we safe?”

Hajime held out a hand to silence Shizuku and took out the compass. There were three paths branching out from the entrance. One to the right, one to the left, and one that went straight forward. After spinning for a little bit, the compass pointed to the right.

“Hmm, it appears we can proceed safely. I was worried this maze was equipped with magic that rendered the compass ineffective, but it seems not.”

“Yeah I was worried about that too, but... Well, this is made with concept magic which is supposed to be stronger than ancient magic. Even the Liberators could only create three kinds of concept magic, so I figured the chances of that were slim.”

Tio breathed a sigh of relief as she ducked under the arch and found that nothing tried to attack her. She and Hajime nodded to each other. *Man, if we'd gotten this thing earlier we wouldn't have had such a hard time with the Reisen Gorge.* Hajime thought bitterly to himself. Yue and Shea, who'd suffered through that labyrinth with him, seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Aww, if we'd had this earlier Miledi-san's traps wouldn't have been a big deal.”

“Mmm... I think she gave it to Haltina on purpose. Curse you, Miledi.”

Yue's hypothesis was likely correct. With the compass, the labyrinths stopped being as much of a challenge. The maze part of them was entirely invalidated. Which was why Miledi and the others had hidden it inside the labyrinth that required challengers to have cleared at least four others first. But even if that logic made sense, it didn't make Hajime, Yue, or Shea feel any better about the suffering they'd endured in Miledi's labyrinth. Yue puffed her cheeks out unhappily while Shea pouted, her lips pursed. Only those who'd experienced that labyrinth's... No, Miledi's unbelievably annoyingness could understand this pain.

“You guys always bring up the Reisen Gorge. What happened there?”

“It's a shame we cannot reminisce together with them... but those three look

utterly defeated whenever they recall that trial. I think it would be best not to dredge up those memories.”

Kaori and Tio watched as Hajime sympathetically rubbed Yue and Shea’s backs. *Just how horrible a person was Miledi the Liberator that all three of them resent her this much?*

After Kouki and the others also crossed under the arch, the party was finally ready to explore this maze. While the compass at least pointed them in the right direction, it would still take them a few hours to cover four kilometers and change while backtracking multiple times thanks to the maze’s layout. And like the rest of the labyrinth, this maze was also freezing. While it was no longer so cold water magic would freeze upon contact with the air, it was still a good bit below zero. Were it not for the party’s Airzones, the cold would pose quite a threat.

“It feels oppressive in here.”

“Yeah. And these walls are strange. Even though they’re completely clear, we can’t see what’s on the other side.”

As Shizuku examined the wall next to her, Suzu shivered and took a few worried steps away from it. These walls, like every other ice wall the party had seen so far, were not natural. They were completely transparent, with no air bubbles or other impurities trapped inside. And like all the other walls, they reflected the party’s silhouettes. Yet it was impossible to see through them. Considering they were only around two meters thick, that made no sense. And Hajime doubted the only reason they were like this was to avoid trivializing the maze part of the maze. There had to be something else. Frowning, Kaori said, “We won’t see more zombies like the ones we fought before, will we?”

“Hmm, it is possible we will face something similar. The monsters of this labyrinth have the ability to completely mask their presence. We should be prepared to face a surprise attack at any time.”

“Don’t worry, Kaori-san! My ears can catch anything! There’s no need to be scared. I’ll know if anything’s coming way before it reaches us! My super bunny ear ears will catch them!”

“Y-Yeah! Thanks, Shea. But what does super bunny ear ears even mean...”

It was likely just a silly name for one of Shea's perception skills, but Kaori couldn't help but be less reassured upon hearing her say that. Shea ignored Kaori's question and puffed her chest out proudly. She then pounded her fist against it to show how supremely confident she was. Naturally, that caused her two melons to jiggle a little, reminding everyone just how stacked she was. Though Shea's aim was to reassure Kaori, Suzu, and Shizuku, who all seemed a little worried, all she succeeded in doing was make everyone think she should cover up more. Kouki and Ryutarou's gazes were glued to Shea's boobs, and Hajime sent them a glare so cold it made the surrounding temperature seem balmy. The two of them gulped and hurriedly looked away. In a way, Shea had contributed to making everyone more nervous, not less.

"Sheesh. Shea, you really need to..."

Despite his words, Hajime couldn't help but stare at Shea's bouncing breasts as well. It was as if gravity magic was forcing his gaze toward them. Ever since Hajime had accepted Shea as a lover, he'd been unable to resist those unintentionally erotic gestures of hers.

"Hajime-kun, where exactly are you looking? Hmmm?"

"Ahem! Uh, take a left here."

Hajime turned around to see Kaori glaring at him. Her demonic stand was tapping its sword menacingly behind her. Hajime hurriedly turned back to his compass and pretended to check it. Yue gave him a warm smile, Tio tried to press her own boobs against him, and Shizuku glared reproachfully at him, but Hajime ignored them all and strode forward. Realizing what she'd just done, Shea blushed. She then hugged herself and looked down bashfully.

"O-Oh Hajime-san, you pervert. You really like my boobs, huh? But we can't do *that* here! We've gotta focus on beating this labyrinth. If you start doing *that* to my boobs here, I'll be too tired to do anything else! We're in the middle of enemy territory, you know!"

"Shea, please shut up."



Kouki and the others' eyes glazed over, while Tio hung on to every word with a mixture of interest and jealousy. On the other hand, Kaori's glare grew even sharper. Lips twitching, Hajime kept his gaze pointed firmly forward and said nothing more. He'd decided to plead the fifth. Unfortunately, Yue wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily.

"Hajime... You did *that* to Shea? It was her first time... you monster!"

"I tried to hold back. But in the end, I just ended up doing it the same way I do it with you..."

What the heck does that refer to!? Kouki and the others screamed internally. It was easy to forget after all the fantastical experiences they'd had, but the kids here were all in the midst of puberty. Especially the boys. They couldn't help but be curious about the unknown world of sex. Doubly so because these events concerned people they knew.

"Wh-What should we do, Shizushizu!? Should we ask Sheashea what happened, just for future reference!? What do you think!?"

"C-Calm down Suzu! You're starting to sound like Kaori!"

"Kouki... You're the hero, right? Do the heroic thing and ask Nagumo! I gotta know what *that* is!"

"Like hell I can ask that! And how is that heroic at all!?"

While everyone was debating whether or not to ask Hajime and Shea what *that* referred to, Hajime suddenly came to a halt. A second later, there was an earsplitting boom. A streak of light flashed right over Suzu's head, grazing a few strands of hair as it passed. Suzu looked over and saw Hajime pointing Donner at her. He'd moved so fast she hadn't even noticed it happen.

"Eeek..."

Trembling, tears in her eyes, Suzu patted the top of her head. Thanks to her short stature, the bullet had only shaved off a few hairs. Unlike the time with Yue, where Hajime had ended up scraping her scalp too. For a moment, Kouki and the others thought Hajime had shot at Suzu because he was annoyed at them. But then— "Graaaah."

“Ah!?”

They heard a low growl from behind them. Hurriedly turning around, they saw a monster half-jutting out of the ice wall, its claws inches from Suzu’s neck. There was a hole in its chest, and as they watched it slumped all the way out of the wall and hit the ground with a thud.

“We’ve got more coming from the left and right walls.”

Hajime’s serious tone drove all unnecessary thoughts out of the others’ heads and they readied themselves for battle. The joking atmosphere from earlier was gone. A moment later, statues of ice started coming through the walls. They had sharp claws and a single horn on their foreheads. That, combined with their muscular builds, made them look just like the ogres that showed up in Japanese folklore.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

There were five on each side. Hajime decided to dub these creatures Frost Ogres. Without any discussion, Hajime and the others naturally turned to the left while Kouki’s party turned right.

“Shizuku, let’s blitz them! Radiant Slash!”

“Got it! Flash Blitz!”

Ignoring the ogres’ threatening roars, Kouki and Shizuku used their Flash Step to dash forward and unleash their fastest attacks. Two Frost Ogres fell in an instant. While the remaining ogres were reeling, Ryutarou charged forward and drove his fist into the chest of another one, pulverizing it. In the meantime, Suzu used her barriers to trap the final two. Unlike the monsters they’d fought earlier, these ogres didn’t regenerate. After destroying them, red mana crystals fell out of their lifeless bodies. Just in case though, Kouki and the others decided to overkill their targets.

“Kouki-kun, Ryutarou-kun! Now’s your chance!”

“Okay!”

“You got it!”

Suzu used her barrier burst to send the last two ogres flying. They sailed

through the air, defenseless. Kouki and Ryutarou finished them off before they could do a thing. It was a perfectly executed battle plan. Kouki and the others grinned at each other, but didn't drop their guard. Just then, they heard a cute yet intimidating yell come from behind them.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Turning around, Kouki and the others saw Shea somersaulting through the air, her slender legs pointed toward the roof. Looking further up, they saw all five Frost Ogres lined up vertically above her. They had no idea how things ended up like this, but it was obvious Shea had just kicked them into the air. Not haphazardly either, but in such a way that they all lined up. *Why's she doing that?* A moment later, Kouki's unspoken question was answered.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!?”

Gravity once again exerted its hold over the Frost Ogres, and they tumbled to the ground. Shea righted herself in midair and readied Drucken. Her graceful movements were captivating. But the barrage of blows that followed was too merciless to be considered graceful.

“One!”

“Bwah!?”

“Two!”

“Gah!?”

“Three!”

“Blagh!?”

Each one of Shea's shouts was accompanied by an ogre's dying scream. With each blow, Shea did a single revolution, twirling like a ballerina. That caused each successive blow to have even more power, and Shea made sure to complete each revolution just as the next ogre fell into Drucken's reach. The third Frost Ogre was hit so hard even its mana crystal shattered into a thousand pieces as Drucken slammed into it. And Shea managed it all without using any body strengthening magic. Shards of ice shot out like cannonballs, blowing through the nearby ice wall. Even with its speedy regeneration, it was possible

to see through it now.

“Four!”

“Hrrrghh!?”

Shea wasn't done yet. She sped up her rotation, adding even more centrifugal force to her hammer. It honestly seemed more like she was toying with the Frost Ogres than taking them seriously as opponents.

“And finally, fiiiiive!”

There was a loud boom as Shea's hammer slammed into the last ogre. After five rotations, Drucken had broken the sound barrier. A visible layer of air covered Drucken as it moved faster than the surrounding air could move out of the way. The Frost Ogre shattered from the force of the impact, then was blown backward so hard that its shards pierced through three layers of ice walls.

“You're too slow, too weak, and too spineless! Pathetic!”

Shea swung Drucken over her shoulder. The girl who'd started out as a gentle bunny of the forest had turned into a real demon. Kouki and the others paled as they watched the massacre unfold in front of them. When the final ogre was killed, their eyes glazed over.

“That's right. We're too slow, too weak, and too spineless... We shouldn't be satisfied with easy victories like these. Hahaha...”

“Kouki... You don't have to put yourself down like that. It's better just to not think too hard about the stuff she says.”

“I love bunnies... but I'm not sure I'll want to hold them anymore after we go back to Earth...”

“It's fine, Shizushizu. That thing isn't a bunny. It just looks like one, but it's definitely not.”

There was no need for Shizuku to be scared of the innocent, garden-variety rabbits back on Earth. Ignoring the peanut gallery, Hajime turned to Shea and asked with a grimace, “Shea, were your super bunny ear ears or whatever able to sense those monsters coming?”

“You know, Hajime-san. I kind of just picked that name on a whim so I'd

prefer it if you not use it. It's kinda embarrassing..."

Fidgeting a little, Shea then replied to Hajime's question.

"I was able to sense them, but only just before they came. I've memorized their sound now though, so I should be able to sense them sooner next time."

"I see... I could only sense them right before they came too. And only because there was a slight flow of mana that my Demon Eye caught. Tio was right, these guys have some way to erase their presence."

"So it would seem. I doubt those are the only monsters waiting for us. It would be wise to assume all enemies within this maze excel in ambushes."

"Mmm... But they're not that tough. Shea was right, they're weak."

"They don't regenerate either. So the only real problem is how long the path is..."

Indeed, Shea's earlier insults to the Frost Ogres were more or less on the mark. They were slow, weak, and far too spineless to be threatening. Meaning there was only a single concern. Whether or not the party would be able to maintain a status of high alert throughout their entire winding trek in the maze.

Kaori looked pensive for a moment, then turned to everyone. She implored them to speak up if they felt even the slightest bit exhausted, either physically or mentally. She looked nothing like the comic relief character that had panicked at the sight of zombies or nearly killed Ryutarou on accident while arguing with Yue. Instead, her serious expression looked just like that of a concerned healer. Naturally, everyone, including Yue, nodded solemnly in response.

Twenty minutes after Kaori's transformation into cool Kaori. The party had continued fending off surprise attacks from Frost Ogres while also avoiding all manner of traps and pitfalls. Thanks to Kaori's stellar support, no one had grown tired yet. However, Kouki and the others were growing mentally exhausted from the constant surprise attacks and lack of change in scenery. Kaori and Tio had both been continually casting restoration magic on them, but there was only so much they could do. Suzu, who was the most exhausted of

the lot, turned to Hajime and tried to distract herself by asking him “Nagumo-kun, you don’t look like this is bothering you at all. How do you train your focus to be like that?”

By this point, even Shea, who was nearly unflappable, was starting to look a little haggard. Only Hajime seemed unaffected by the constant mental strain.

“Dunno, really. I guess it’s cause I had to be constantly alert until I met Yue. So I kind of instinctively learned how to stay focused.”

“Ah... I see.”

Suzu fell silent as she imagined what Hajime must have gone through. All alone in the dark, he’d had to constantly watch out for monsters trying to eat him. No matter how badly his body screamed at him to rest, no matter how sluggish his thoughts became, he had no choice but to remain alert or he’d die. He hadn’t trained his powers of concentration, he’d had no choice but to reach that level or die.

The rest of the party stiffened their resolve as they felt the weight of those casual words. “This isn’t the time to be complaining!” Ryutarou yelled, the light returning to his eyes. Kouki, too, shook his head and refocused his attention. Seeing that both guys were about to get themselves overly pumped up, Shizuku lightly said, “Nagumo-kun. How much further is it? We’ve been walking for a while now... so you’d think we’d be close. I’m getting pretty tired here.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding. We haven’t even gotten to the part covered in snow yet and you’re already complaining?”

“I... wouldn’t say I’m complaining. Just giving you an objective assessment of my condition.”

Shizuku pouted, and Hajime smiled faintly. He could tell that even Shea and Kaori were beginning to get exhausted, and this was Shizuku’s way of trying to help. Nodding, he replied, “Well, I guess it might not be a bad idea to take a short break. As soon as we can find a safe spot, let’s rest.”

“That sounds good... Thanks, Nagumo-kun.”

Shizuku’s expression softened. Hajime just shrugged his shoulders and set his compass to search for a suitable spot to rest. Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Tio all stared

intently at Shizuku, who was still smiling at Hajime's back. They then started whispering quietly to each other. For better or worse, Shizuku was too tired to notice.

After a few more minutes of walking, the party found themselves at a dead end. The corridor widened a little at the far end, and embedded into the wall at the end was a set of double doors. The door sat right at the border of where the snow mists started covering the maze. It appeared this was the resting spot the compass had found for them. Incidentally, they still happened to also be following the right path to reach the end of the maze.

"What a magnificent set of doors."

"Mmm... They're pretty."

Tio and Yue both sighed in admiration. Everyone else nodded in agreement. The doors looked so ostentatious that it was hard to believe they were carved out of nothing but ice. Complex patterns of thorns and roses were carved into the doors' entire length.

"This is..."

Hajime narrowed his eyes warily as he walked up to the doors. Right at head height was a carved circle of thorns, inside which sat three round holes. Hajime stepped forward and pushed on the doors with all his might. But as expected, they didn't budge.

"Figured as much. I guess you've gotta put something into these three holes to unlock these doors."

"Mmm... Taking the fastest route backfired."

"Yeah."

Hajime smiled ruefully and scratched his head.

"What do you think, Hajime-san? Should we look for the keys?"

Shea didn't sound too enthusiastic about the prospect. She wouldn't have minded normally, but right now the whole party was exhausted. Kouki and the others weren't saying anything, but their expressions made it clear they were at their limits.

“Hajime... If it’s safe here, then...”

“Yeah. Let’s just take a break here.”

The moment Hajime said that, Kouki and the others relaxed. They slumped to the ground, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

“Guys, don’t lean against the walls. It’s possible we might still get hit by a surprise attack. Stick to the center of the corridor.”

While the others moved toward the center, Hajime took a few steps away from the door, then accessed his Treasure Trove. A second later, a huge tent appeared out of nowhere. The sides had been removed so that he could see any ambushes coming ahead of time, but seeing as there were metal struts on all sides, it was clear there was still some invisible barrier protecting them from the elements. Originally there had been no covering atop the roof either, but he’d added it to help keep the tent warm. Even just the psychological effect of being covered by warm colors helped people retain heat. And in truth, the gentle orange color of the ceiling did help everyone relax a bit more. Furthermore, the fabric was actually metal fibers, so it added to the tent’s defense. Kouki and the others gaped at its size; the tent could comfortably fit fifteen people inside.

“Whoa!? The floor’s even heated!”

“Th-The carpet’s as fluffy as the one in the royal palace...”

Shizuku and Suzu exclaimed in surprise. Their faces melted into satisfied smiles as they enjoyed their unexpected reward.

“H-Hey, Nagumo. Is that a kotatsu!?”

“Damn this place is fancy as hell...”

Kouki and Ryutarou shivered, simultaneously awed and scared.

“Hey, Taniguchi. Stop crawling on the carpet and get inside. You can keep your shoes on, since we don’t know when we’ll be attacked.”

“N-Nagumo-kuuun! I could never defile this paradise with my dirty shoes!”

“Hah, who the hell do you think I am!? Both the carpet and the kotatsu have been coated in a layer of ultra-fine ore. And that ore is enchanted with

restoration magic.”

“Y-You mean...”

“That’s right, it’s self-cleaning. The whole tent goes back to its original state at regular intervals. Also just touching the carpet or kotatsu will restore your clothes and stamina.”

“Unbelievable! This is a revolution of home comfort!”

Suzu grew even more excited.

“I should have known you thought everything through, Nagumo,” Ryutarou muttered, impressed. Even Yue and the others were amazed. They hadn’t been aware of all the extra upgrades to the tent. Suzu’s endless litany of praise seemed to have put Hajime in a good mood, and he smiled in an unusual display of pride. Suzu crawled across the carpet like a worm, headed slowly toward the kotatsu. Kouki and the others all huddled inside it as well.

“Ahhh... I’m in heaven.”

Shizuku smiled, her tone completely relaxed. She thrust her feet inside the blanket and rest her head on the table, an expression of pure bliss spreading across her face. Her usual stern expression was nowhere to be found. She was fully indulging in this break.



The rest of the party was doing the same. Though the Airzones had kept people from freezing, the fact that they'd been surrounded by nothing but ice since entering the caverns had made it seem psychologically cold. So the inviting warmth of the tent sucked everyone in. For a moment they forgot they were in a labyrinth and let out satisfied moans, sounding like a group of Frost Zombies. Yue and Shea took up positions on either side of Hajime as usual, and he brought out four of his Cross Bits.

Kouki and the others hurriedly got to their feet, thinking they were about to be in a fight, but then returned to lazing about the moment they saw the Cross Bits leave the tent and start scouting all of the branching paths of the maze. They figured he'd just sent them out to secure the safety of the area. Once they opened themselves up to relaxing, the exhaustion that had been piling up hit them all at once. Kouki figured this must be what it felt like to be a corporate slave working overtime. Yue scooted closer to Hajime, then looked up at him and stroked his cheek, the gesture filled with kindness.

"You okay? Tired?"

"Remember what I said? The tent's covered in restoration magic. Sending a few Cross Bits out won't tire me out in here."

Hajime covered Yue's hand with his own and smiled gently at her. Their eyes turned into heart pupils. A second later, a fluffy pair of bunny ears came to rest on the nape of his neck. Turning around, Hajime saw that Shea was resting her head on his shoulder.

"What's wrong, Shea?"

"I'm resting in your arms to heal faster—"

Shea didn't bother mincing her words. She nuzzled against Hajime's neck, making it clear that she had no intention of holding back because other people were around. Hajime found her boldness cute, and he wrapped his free arm around her and hugged her close. Seeing that, Yue decided to plop her head on Hajime's shoulder as well. Now Shea had heart pupils as well. Of course, the scene caused Kaori to burn with jealousy, and her stand appeared once more. Meanwhile, the party's resident perverted dragon crawled at Hajime's feet, panting. Suzu watched the familiar scene with a weary sigh.

“Those guys don’t understand the pain of being single.”

Kouki and the others nodded vigorously. After a while, Shea started cooking a meal for the group, and the delicious smell of hotpot wafted through the air. The ingredients had, of course, come from Hajime’s Treasure Trove. It was all fresh seafood from Erisen.

“Hajime... Say aaaaaah.”

“Ahhh... Yeah, that’s good.”

“I’m next, Hajime-san. Say aaaaaah.”

Once it was ready, both Yue and Shea started feeding Hajime. He could, of course, feed himself, but they wouldn’t miss an opportunity to spoil him for anything. Sitting across from them, Ryutarou closed his eyes to their flirting, his expression that of a monk in the midst of ascetic training. On the other hand, Kouki was staring pointedly at the hotpot and shutting the rest of the world out. Shizuku and Suzu had gotten so used to Hajime, Yue, and Shea’s flirting that they just ignored it and enjoyed their food. Or so it seemed. But while Shizuku was smiling, Suzu was grimacing, as if nursing a stomachache. Hajime gave Shea a troubled smile, then swallowed the spoonful she brought up to his mouth. After chewing for a few seconds he said, “By the way Shea. You’ve been getting better at cooking by the day. You’ll make a good wife someday.”

“O-Oh you, Hajime-san... you’re flattering me. But I’m glad you think I’m so cute and precious that you don’t want to let me out of your sight for even a second!”

I never said any of that. But Hajime had grown more tolerant of Shea, and he didn’t even bother saying that out loud. Yue suddenly popped in between Hajime and Shea and asked, “Hajime... What about me?”

“Hm? Isn’t it obvious? You’re the number one wife in the world.”

“Mmm... I’ll try to get better at cooking.”

“Fufufu, Yue-san, how about we practice cooking Hajime-san’s favorite foods together?”

With the addition of Shea, the couple’s, or rather trio’s, flirting had reached

new heights. They were eating a salty hotpot, but it looked as though they were feeding each other dessert or something. Ryutarou grabbed his head and groaned. Finally, Kaori could bear to watch no more. As was her specialty, she brazenly charged forward.

“H-Hey, Hajime-kun? What about me? I’m good at chores and cooking. I can make you delicious food every day.”

A mixture of impatience and hope twinkled in her eyes as she pushed her way toward Hajime’s side. “What do you think you’re doing?” Yue asked coldly and tried to push her away, but Kaori didn’t budge.

“Well, back in school you were the number one girl everyone wanted as their girlfriend. Or rather as their wife. So of course you’d make a good wife too.”

“Jeez, that’s not what I’m asking. I want to know if you think I’d be a good wife for *you*, Hajime-kun!”

Hajime awkwardly averted his gaze, but Kaori wasn’t about to let him escape. She leaned forward, demanding an answer. Fortunately, Yue came to his rescue.

“Kaori... Why do you insist on hurting yourself?”

“Y-Yue!? What’s that supposed to mean!?”

Yue’s words of feigned pity pierced through Kaori like a lance. Tears sprung to her eyes, and Yue smiled victoriously. Naturally, the two started fighting seconds later. Hajime was about to yell at them to stop fighting at the dinner table when something crawled out from under the kotatsu.

“Master. Surely you realize I would make for a wonderful spouse as well. As you are well aware, I live to serve. I guarantee you I would be able to satisfy you every single day! So please, bestow me your compliments!”

“If you want compliments, stop suddenly poking your head up through my crotch.”

Naturally, Hajime’s harsh words made Tio writhe with pleasure. Right on top of his crotch.

“If you don’t restrain yourself, I’m gonna leave you behind when I go home.”

“Nfufufu. So that means you *are* planning on taking me to your world with you. Oh, Master, your love for me is so great it’s suffocating...”

Tio started writhing even faster. *She’s beyond saving now.* Sighing, Hajime patted Tio’s head to calm her down. He then turned to Kaori, who was currently being pinned down and tickled by Yue and patted her head too. That casual gesture was enough to show everyone watching that he cared about them too. And that he wanted them by his side just as much as he wanted Yue and Shea. Just as things were starting to calm down, a sharp voice cut through the happy atmosphere.

“We’re eating right now, so could you keep it down?”

Shizuku’s tone was harsh and utterly devoid of warmth.

“Sh-Shizuku-chan?”

Terrified, Kaori poked her head above the kotatsu. Shizuku was smiling. Smiling quite brightly, in fact. But that smile didn’t reach her eyes. Even Yue stopped tickling Kaori and stiffened up. Tio turned serious, and Kouki, who had nothing to do with the ruckus, dropped his spoon. Ryutarou spit out his mouthful of stew and goggled at Shizuku.

“Sh-Shizushizu? Don’t you think... Actually, nevermind.”

Feeling as though Shizuku was a bit too angry at Hajime and the others for fooling around, Suzu tried to calm her down. But the moment Shizuku turned that smile onto Suzu she withered and averted her gaze. Besides, it was true that Hajime and the others had gotten a little too rowdy during mealtime. Yue, Kaori, and Tio all crawled out of the kotatsu and sat with their backs upright.

“Sh-Shizuku... Is scary.”

Yue muttered quietly. Just as quietly, Kaori responded, “Y-Yep. Shizuku-chan doesn’t get mad often, but when she does she’s really scary.” Shizuku swiveled around, bringing her smile to bear on Yue and Kaori. The two of them looked away. Suzu felt her stomachache worsening at the prospect of resuming her meal in this awkward silence, but it turned out they wouldn’t be.

“Hm? They made it,” Hajime muttered quietly. He put down his chopsticks and started glancing around, which gave everyone else a good opportunity to

resume eating without it being awkward.

“Hey, Nagumo. What is it?”

“Hmm, hold on a second.”

Kouki went back to stuffing himself full of fish dumplings and Hajime continued looking at what seemed to be nothing. The others gave him curious looks as they ate as well. After a few seconds, Hajime nodded to himself and muttered, “Perfect.” He turned around and opened his Treasure Trove. A shiny gray metal plate fell into his hands. It was a new artifact known as a Gate Key. He thrust it out into empty air, and it activated. Space around the plate began to warp, and the key connected to the Gate Keyholes located inside his Cross Bits. Beyond the oval portal that he opened was a hexagonal pedestal of ice. Sitting atop it was a jewel. The jewel emitted a yellow aura, and if this were an RPG it would obviously be a key item. That wasn’t the only thing there, though.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Behind the pedestal was a huge Frost Ogre. It was easily three times the size of the ones they’d seen so far and was charging right at the portal.

“Bwah!?”

Kouki and the others spit out their food, wasting Shea’s lovingly cooked ingredients. Yue instantly deployed a barrier, protecting herself and her plate from the half-chewed food. *Such bad manners.* But Yue didn’t admonish them. After all, she realized that for them, suddenly seeing a Frost Ogre many times bigger than the ones they’d fought so far would be a surprising occurrence. Asking them to remain calm was an impossible request.

“N-Nagu— *Ack! Cough!*”

“That’s gross. Swallow your food before you talk.”

Hajime turned over his shoulder and frowned at Kouki as he reached for the jewel and grabbed it off the pedestal. He didn’t seem the least bit perturbed that a Frost Ogre was bearing down on him. With another flash of his Treasure Trove, he pulled out a metal sphere about the same size as the jewel and dropped it unceremoniously onto the pedestal. Then, he closed the portal. Screaming in impotent rage, the Frost Ogre reached out for Hajime, but it

wouldn't make it before the portal fully closed. Hajime wasn't even looking at the Frost Ogre anymore. He turned around, and the gate closed safely behind him. A second later, there was a loud rumbling in the distance, and the entire maze shook.

"Hmmm, I knew it, it's no normal key. I wanted to just duplicate it but... it'll take too long to analyze the magic circle engraved inside it."

Sighing, Hajime put the jewel to the side. He then picked up his chopsticks and resumed eating as though nothing had happened.

"Huh, so that's what the keys look like. Oh, these fish dumplings are done. Here you go, Hajime-san."

"Ah, thanks Shea."

Shea also resumed flirting with him as though nothing had happened. Kouki and the others had been stunned by what they'd just seen, but seeing the newlywed couple act snapped them back to their senses.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, this isn't right!"

"Are you even allowed to do that!?"

"I feel sorry for that Frost Ogre!"

"Isn't that way too lazy!?"

"What's the problem, guys?"

Hajime really couldn't understand what Kouki and the others were complaining about.

We've got good food and a cozy tent, so what're you all getting so worked up over?

His puzzled expression just irked Kouki even more. Veins bulged in his forehead, and he had to take a few deep breaths to forcibly calm himself down.

"Nagumo. What was that?"

"What do you mean? You saw didn't you?"

"I did, but that doesn't tell me anything! What did you do!?"

“Are you okay, man?”

Since he'd seen and still seemed unable to understand, Hajime began to worry Kouki was so exhausted he was starting to hallucinate. Not only were Kouki's words not getting through, they were just causing Hajime to question his sanity. Kouki was ready to blow. In fact, he was this close to doing a table-flip... No, a kotatsu-flip fit better.

However, Ryutarou hurriedly pinned Kouki's arms behind his back. He understood Kouki's rage, but the food wasn't at fault here. Meanwhile, Hajime turned to Kaori and asked her to make sure Kouki was mentally okay. Kaori, of course, knew what the actual reason behind Kouki's reaction was, so all she could do was give Hajime a troubled smile and explain that it was okay. Watching this all unfold from the sidelines, Shizuku wearily rubbed her temples to assuage her headache and spoke up.

“Umm, so to sum it up, Nagumo-kun, you didn't send out your Cross Bits to patrol the area, but instead to find the keys to this door, right? And when your Cross Bit finally found one of the jewels that unlock the door it awoke the guardian of the jewel?”

Shizuku looked over at Hajime for confirmation, and he nodded. Feeling her headache growing worse, Shizuku continued.

“So then you opened a portal to grab the jewel, and left a bomb for the Frost Ogre, killing it without a fight?”

“Yep. That's exactly it. Just as you saw.”

“That's exactly what the problem is! Aren't guardians of the labyrinths powerful monsters you have to face in a direct battle!?”

Freeing himself from Ryutarou's bind, Kouki leaned forward and shouted something that should have been common sense.

“Nah, it's better if we can collect them without a hassle. Who wants to waste hours running around finding all three jewels?”

“I mean I don't really want to either but... what if the labyrinth doesn't recognize us as true conquerors!?”

Hajime popped a fish dumpling into his mouth and chewed it for a few seconds before answering Kouki's question. *Don't eat in the middle of a conversation!* Kouki glared at him, but Hajime ignored him.

"I had my Cross Bits explore the maze to make sure that won't happen."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. How is this any different from an earth mage using golems to scout out the maze and gathering the jewels for their master, or a dark mage doing the same thing with monsters under their control?"

"W-Well..."

There certainly wasn't any difference. Stymied, Kouki quickly switched to a different track.

"But using a portal to grab the jewel's still cheating isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's a valid concern. That's why I was careful. If using a portal to grab the jewel was against the maze's rules, I would have used the gravity magic abilities of my Cross Bit to absorb whatever spell it brought out to punish cheaters."

"Ah, just like you did to me when I fell asleep in Verbergen..." Shizuku muttered to herself. She was still holding a grudge over the crucifixion incident.

"Though I wasn't expecting it to be a problem. After all, the maze didn't do anything when Yue used spatial magic to save Sakagami. As long as it's not us personally who are trying to take shortcuts through the maze, it doesn't seem to mind."

Plus, Hajime had even killed the jewel's guardian, so it wasn't as though he'd bypassed that either.

"Is this really okay? Is conquering a labyrinth really supposed to be this easy?"

Kouki couldn't accept Hajime's cavalier attitude toward exploiting the gray areas in the rules regarding how challengers were meant to progress through the labyrinth. Ryutarou lightly patted Kouki on the back, his expression similar to that of an enlightened Buddha.

"Kouki... if you keep worrying about this stuff, you'll just go bald."

Suzu backed away, creeped out by Ryutarou's strange expression.

"Shizushizu, is it just me, or has Ryutarou gone weird?"

"He's been liberated from common sense, I guess? Can't say I'm surprised, since Nagumo-kun is a living symbol of uncommon sense."

"I have to be careful, or I'll be poisoned by Nagumo-kun's uncommon sense too. Ah, I just realized. This must be why Kaorin's beyond saving now..."

"Huh!?" Kaori turned to Suzu, surprised. Suzu gave Kaori a look that was half-sadness, half-pity. *The normal Kaori who understood common sense is gone forever... Alas.*

Hajime glared at Shizuku and muttered, "That's a pretty harsh way of putting it. Well, whatever..."

"I've found the other two jewels too. They have the same traps and guardians protecting them. I'm just worried if I'm the only one to collect all the jewels the labyrinth won't recognize anyone but me as having cleared it. So just in case, you guys should split up into two teams to get the rest. Amanogawa, your party gets one while Yue and the others get the other."

"Mmm... Okay."

"Haaah, fine."

Yue and Kouki nodded. For some reason though, Kouki still looked dissatisfied about something.

Sometime later, Kaori stood in front of the double doors and looked worriedly at it.

"I hope Shizuku-chan and the others are alright..."

Two jewels already sat inside the grooves carved out for them. The yellow jewel Hajime had obtained without any effort at all, and the red jewel Yue and the others had been able to easily acquire after obliterating the room's guardian. Only one remained. The one Kouki and the others had gone to retrieve. This was the first time the party had split up since entering the labyrinth, so Kaori was worried about the safety of her childhood friends. For a

few minutes now she'd been fidgeting restlessly, debating whether or not she should go help them. Every time she suggested it though, Yue would say, "You're being overprotective, *Mom*" and Kaori would fall silent.

"Hajime-kun..."

"Don't make that face. Those guys should be strong enough to handle enemies on that level at least... Yeah, see, they're already done."

Hajime had been watching the battle through the sightstone embedded in his Cross Bits and linked to his Demon Eye. Smiling, he told Kaori the good news.

"R-Really!? They're okay!? No one's hurt!?"

"Yeah, they're fine. They struggled a bit, but no one's seriously injured. Sakagami got frostbite, but Taniguchi's already healing him."

"Thank goodness!"

Kaori patted her chest, relieved. Hajime led Kouki and the others back to the door using his Cross Bit. All four of them seemed oddly refreshed. Shea tilted her bunny ears, wondering what had reinvigorated them so.

"Why do you guys look so happy? That thing was weaker than the Frost Turtle so of course you could beat it."

"They are likely glad that they were able to clear a portion of the labyrinth the 'correct' way. You see, Master's approach was so rational that it stripped any sense of adventure from the quest, which was what they were lamenting earlier."

As usual, Tio was able to read their feelings easily.

"I see," Shea and Hajime said simultaneously, and nodded. When all was said and done, Hajime was still a guy. He loved the romantic ideal of a good adventure as much as anyone else. Until now he'd never thought of approaching the labyrinths as challenges to be enjoyed, but finally, he grasped a sliver of what Shizuku had meant when she'd said common sense. Kaori ran over and glomped Shizuku while Kouki walked up to the door and took a green jewel out of his pocket.

"Nagumo, I just stick it in here, right?"

“Yeah, that’s all you gotta do.”

Kouki gulped nervously and placed the final jewel into the groove carved out for it. A second later, the jewels began emitting light. Each jewel emitted light corresponding to its color. Ribbons of light flowed down doors’ engravings, like water filling a canal. The light from the yellow jewel lit up the door’s outline like a sun while the green filled out the complex patterns of thorns, and the red breathed life into the roses. It was a marvelous spectacle.

Once the door was completely illuminated, the jewels flashed. The massive double doors slowly creaked open. A gust of wind passed through, briefly blowing back the mist of snow. Suzu timidly peered into the corridor that lay beyond, and her eyes widened in surprise.

“Whoa, what is this... It’s like a mirror house.”

“Except this is made of ice... Though, this is just as reflective as any mirror.”

Indeed, the passage beyond was a world of mirrors. Walls opposite each other reflected the opposite wall, creating an optical illusion making it seem as though the walls stretched on infinitely. These ice walls were nothing like the previous ones, which only faintly reflected silhouettes. Were it not for the chill coming from the walls, Hajime would have doubted they were even made of ice. These walls truly were mirrors of ice, and not in a figurative sense.

“Let’s go. Don’t get lost, guys.”

The party walked into the mystical corridor of mirrors. Inside, it was just like the mirror houses one found in carnivals. Light bounced off the walls endlessly, and there were countless reflected copies of each party member stretching out for eternity. The sky above was covered in a mist of snow, and it was much dimmer and gloomier here than it had been in the earlier part of the maze. The party’s footsteps echoed loudly across the hard stone floor, the only noise in the otherwise silent corridor. It seemed these ice mirrors reflected sound as well as they did light.

“It feels like it’s sucking us in...” Yue muttered as she examined her reflection in the ice. It certainly did feel as though the endlessly reflecting wall was an entrance to some bottomless abyss, just waiting to drag those who peered into it into its lightless depths. Captivated, Yue reached out for her reflection. Before

she could touch it, Hajime, who was standing next to her, reached out and hugged her. His warm embrace snapped Yue out of her reverie and she returned to reality.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let it take you.”

“Mmm...”

Hajime’s gaze was filled with love, but there was also a fiery determination burning in his pupils. Elated, Yue smiled gently. The two of them stopped walking and gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Do you two have to flirt every five minutes or something?”

Shizuku glared at Hajime, giving voice to everyone’s feelings. *They were just at it in the tent, and now they’re doing it again. They’re just looking for excuses to flirt now...* Shizuku thought angrily. However, Hajime and Yue were unperturbed by Shizuku’s caustic remarks. Their love for each other was so great that if it could be measured as a stat, it would have long since passed the maximum value and caused a bug in the system.

“Sorry. Yue’s just too cute.”

“Mmm... Sorry. Hajime’s just too wonderful.”

Shizuku heaved a very long and very weary sigh. Kaori puffed her cheeks out angrily, while Tio and Shea just smiled ruefully. The two of them were used to this now. However, Hajime and Yue’s romcom skit did help ease the nerves of Kouki and the others, who’d been on edge ever since walking into this hall of mirrors.

The party continued unimpeded by monsters or traps, following the guidance of Hajime’s compass. After walking for about thirty minutes or so, there was finally a change in their surroundings. Kouki suddenly came to a halt and started glancing about. Noticing his odd behavior, Hajime called a halt and turned to him. Shizuku turned back as well and asked, “Kouki? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just... Did you guys hear a voice just now? It sounded like a person whispering.”

“H-Hey, Kouki-kun, don’t scare me like that!”

Hearing human whispering was one of the hallmarks of horror movies and Kaori timidly examined her countless reflections, goosebumps rising up her arms. She was scared that Shizuku's earlier prediction that they'd suddenly get more party members without noticing it had come true.

"Anyone else hear anything? Shea?"

Hajime looked to the other party members in turn.

"Nope, I didn't hear anything. I don't sense anyone other than the people here, either."

Shea closed her eyes and focused on her hearing, her bunny ears twitching. The other party members shook their heads; they hadn't heard anything either.

"I could have sworn I heard something..."

"Maybe you're just hearing things cause you're a little tense?"

"Ryutarou... Yeah, maybe."

Yeah, maybe I'm just hearing things. No one else heard anything after all. Though Kouki still wasn't completely convinced, he decided to chalk it up to his imagination.

"Shea, mind checking for me?"

"Roger!"

Though the others seemed to think it had just been Kouki's imagination, Hajime asked the most skilled scout in the party to search the area for them. Honestly, Shea thought it had probably just been Kouki's imagination too, but Hajime's serious expression convinced her to check anyway. Her bunny ears twitched, and she focused all her attention on her hearing. Finding nothing, the party resumed navigating the maze with perfect precision. But after a few minutes, Kouki stopped again. This time he shouted, "There it is again! I knew it, it's not just my imagination! I definitely heard it!"

"K-Kouki?"

Shizuku shot Kouki a confused glance as he searched wildly for the source of the sound. Seeing their confused looks caused him to panic a little. Desperate, he began to shout.

“That was clear as day! It said ‘Are you really okay with this?’”

“B-But Kouki, I didn’t hear anything.”

“Y-Yeah. I didn’t hear anything either...”

“Likewise... Not even the faintest hint of something.”

Worry gnawed at him as he realized he was the only one hearing this voice. It felt as though he was the only one trapped in the darkness, suffocating. That worry and despair turned into frustration, and he unfairly grew annoyed at his comrades. Venting his anger, Kouki looked up at the sky and screamed.

“I’m not lying! I mean it! Dammit, who are you!? Where are you!? Stop sneaking around and show yourself!”

“Kouki, calm down!”

While Shizuku was trying to pacify Kouki, Hajime turned to Shea.

“Shea?”

“I didn’t hear a thing...”

Hajime had expected as much since Shea hadn’t caught anything last time either. It stood to reason regular hearing wouldn’t have picked up on the voice this time either.

“Hajime... did you sense any mana?”

“Nope. It was like that with the zombies and ogres too. Looks like this labyrinth’s walls are capable of concealing the flow of mana. We can’t trust my Demon Eye to pick up on everything.”

“Hrmm. It is possible Kouki has buckled under the strain of traversing this labyrinth, but... this is far too sudden. It seems more likely to me that he is receiving some sort of signal directly.”

“But Shea’s ears couldn’t pick up on it, and Hajime’s eye couldn’t sense it, so how are we supposed to defend against that?”

While Kaori and Tio were discussing what the nature of Kouki’s voice could be, Kouki himself was still trying to desperately prove he wasn’t crazy. Hajime turned to him and said, “Amanogawa, calm down.”

“Nagumo. I’m not lying, I swear. I definitely...”

“I know. I don’t think it’s just in your head either.”

“Huh?”

Kouki knew from experience just how brusquely Hajime treated him. So he was surprised when Hajime believed him despite having no evidence to back up his claim. A mixture of shock and relief spread through him, and Kouki finally calmed down. Hajime turned to everyone else and spoke.

“It’s best to assume something’s sending Kouki signals directly. If that whispering voice is part of this maze’s trial, then it’s likely we’ll all start hearing voices very soon. I dunno what the labyrinth is going for here, but... I can’t think of any way to defend against the voices right now. So just be prepared, guys.”

Hajime believed it was safer to assume this was another one of the labyrinth’s unexplained phenomena than to write the voice off as Kouki’s delusions. It was less that he believed Kouki and more that he was experienced enough to know that labyrinths always threw the unexpected at challengers. Ryutarou and the others shook off their confusion and nodded. Suddenly wary of their countless reflections, the party once again resumed their trek. After another few minutes of walking— *They didn’t believe you.*

“Ngh, not again...”

Another whisper reached Kouki’s ears. Those words struck Kouki to the core. The voice itself was grating too. It sounded like nails on a chalkboard. Little wonder that it got on Kouki’s nerves so. But this time Kouki didn’t start shouting back at it. While he wasn’t able to keep it from getting to him, he was still able to maintain a semblance of composure. Unknown phenomena rattled people’s psyche more than anything, but now that the party knew it was some sort of interference coming from the labyrinth itself, there was less reason to be afraid. Kouki stamped down on his misgivings, and focused on the voice, trying to glean any information from it that he could. As he played the voice back in his mind, he realized something.

“I recognize it?”

Indeed, the voice Kouki had heard sounded vaguely familiar. *Who’s voice is it,*

though? And where have I heard it before? As he cocked his head quizzically, Shizuku and the others looked at him worriedly.

“Kouki, are you okay?”

“Shizuku... Yeah, I’m fine. I just heard the voice again, but...”

“But?”

“I could be wrong, but the voice sounds familiar.”

Shizuku put a hand on her chin and said thoughtfully, “Back in the Haltina Woods there was a monster who could imitate our forms. This feels similar to that, where the labyrinth is interfering with us directly. It’s possible the voice is imitating one of ours. Kouki, don’t be fooled by it. Let us know if it says anything.”

“I will. You be careful too, Shizuku. If Nagumo’s right, you guys’ll start hearing the voice soon too.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

Shizuku smiled at Kouki, and he managed to calm down a little. His taut expression loosened into a smile. It was moments like these that reminded him he was truly blessed to have a childhood friend willing to support him all the time like this. But a second later— *You’ve realized it already, haven’t you?*

“Ah.”

The voice coiled around Kouki’s heart, constricting it like a vice. It felt as though it were laying all of Kouki’s vulnerabilities bare, the parts of him that he’d tried to hide from everyone. His vision blurred, and he reflexively turned to Shizuku for help. But the help he expected never came. Next to him, his childhood friend looked just as stiff as he did. Something had clearly happened to her as well.

“Shizuku, don’t tell me...”

“Yes... I heard it too. It was a girl’s voice. And it sounded familiar too. It said ‘Turning your eyes from the truth again, are you?’”

Finally, someone other than Kouki had started hearing voices. This proved the theory that they were coming from the labyrinth. Hajime stopped and turned to

Kouki and Shizuku.

“Amanogawa, what about you? What did you hear?”

“Mine said, ‘You’ve realized it already, haven’t you?’”

“Huh, so they say different things to different people... Any idea what they mean?”

Both of them opened their mouths to say no, but the words caught in their throat. It felt as though someone had just pulled them by the shoulder and asked, “Really now?” Anxious, Shizuku and Kouki swallowed their words. They exchanged glances and realized they’d both had the same sensation.

“Shizuku-chan? Are you okay? Did—”

Kaori started walking over to Shizuku, but then Suzu suddenly let out a yelp.

“S-Suzu-chan, you too?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Kaori started and turned to Suzu, who confirmed her suspicions. While Suzu was still recovering from the shock, Ryutarou suddenly yelled out, “Whoa!?” Hajime turned to him and Suzu and asked, “Looks like the labyrinth’s finally showing its cards... Sakagami, what did the voice tell you?”

Hajime was hoping to glean some idea of what this trial was based off what the voice was saying to everyone. He turned to Tio, who always had reliable insight in these situations. Guessing what he wanted, Tio nodded and turned her attention to Suzu and Ryutarou. Grimacing, Suzu answered before Ryutarou.

“Umm... my voice said something like Kouki-kun’s. ‘Surely you’ve realized it by now?’”

“Yeah, mine said the same thing as Shizuku. ‘How long do you plan on deceiving yourself?’”

Surprisingly, even ever-cheerful Ryutarou looked put off by the voice. Like Kouki and Shizuku, they seemed not to understand the meaning behind the voice’s words. Though the words themselves were unfathomable, they somehow left all four of them feeling deeply unsettled, as though a dark fog

had descended on their hearts.

“That’s pretty abstract. I feel like if it wanted to lead us astray it’d do something more direct...”

Like ask us to do something specific, or go somewhere, or something. But if it’s not that, then what?

“Suzu, Ryutarou. Did the voices sound familiar to you as well?”

“Hmm, now that you mention it... they did.”

“Ah, yeah. I felt like I recognized mine too.”

Tio lapsed into thought. Silence fell as the party came to a halt. An oppressive atmosphere settled around them. In order to dispel the somber mood that had taken root Yue clapped her hands together loudly and said, “Mmm... Either way, we need to keep going.”

“True that.”

There was little meaning in standing around. Nothing would happen unless they moved forward. Kouki nodded in agreement, and Hajime flashed Yue a smile before resuming the journey.

Where do you plan on returning to?

“Oho...”

The moment he started walking, Hajime heard a voice whisper that to him. He raised his eyebrows slightly, but didn’t stop. Moments later, voices reached Yue and the others as well. While everyone told each other what they’d heard, no one stopped this time. The party traversed through the maze for another three hours. According to the compass, they were growing close to their goal. From what Hajime could tell, another few hours of walking would see them out of this maze.

But the closer they got to the exit, the more incessant the whispering became. That wasn’t all. Its effect on the minds of the party was growing stronger too. Slowly but surely, the incomprehensible words started dredging up old fears and past traumas, giving glimpses as to what those words were referring to. Like ink spilled on white paper, the whispering’s influence spread,

dyeing the hearts and minds of the party pitch black. Before long, everyone kept repeating the words in their head even when they weren't being whispered to them. It felt as though rocks had settled in everyone's stomachs.

It'll happen again. Yue's heart felt like a lump of ice. In the back of her mind, she thought back to her uncle and her retainers, all people she'd trusted completely. She thought she'd put all that behind her now, but the labyrinth's whispers kept bringing the memories back. Yue had no difficulty in guessing what the voice was referring to when it said it would happen again.

It was your fault. A lump of regret settled in the pit of Shea's stomach. Over and over, she saw visions of her desperate flight from Verbergen, where she'd been forced to watch so many of her family members die. The screams of her loved ones tormented her thoughts ceaselessly.

No one will accept you. Feelings blacker than her scales swirled around inside Tio. She saw nightmares of the time when she was a child and her clan was persecuted by the other races. She'd been too young to even be able to control her powers and could do nothing but watch helplessly as her brethren were swept away by rising tides of fire. Even now she could vividly remember the fear and contempt in their eyes as they kicked aside the corpses of her family. Those eyes would never leave her.

You're so jealous you wish you could kill her. Barbs of pain lodged themselves into Kaori's heart. Even though she'd gone so far as to abandon her body to gain power, it felt as though Yue was still miles ahead of her. Before she knew it, Kaori found herself shooting Yue envious looks without even realizing it. It felt as though she'd been pierced through with thorns. Blades of regret cut deeply into her, and for a moment she felt as though she were actually bleeding. That illusory blood whirled around her, swallowing her whole.

"Ah, now I get it. That's my voice."

Hajime's words brought everyone back to reality, and they stopped drowning in the whispers surrounding them.

"Hajime?"

Yue shot Hajime a questioning look. He looked completely unfazed by the whispers.

“You guys all said you recognized your voices right? I thought so too. After listening to it for a while I realized that’s cause it’s my voice. When I was helping dad out with his game design projects I often played back my own voice to test sound levels and stuff. Your voice sounds pretty different to you when you’re not hearing it inside your head, which is why it took me so long to realize. But this is definitely the same voice I heard played back to me back then.”

At Hajime’s words, everyone else nodded in realization. Because of how different one’s voice sounded when heard from an outside source, they hadn’t noticed until just now. Kaori furrowed her brows and muttered with a frown, “But then wouldn’t that mean that the things the voice is saying are...”

“Have you not all realized from the contents of the whispers? Those are our own feelings. Whether we’re aware of them or not, these are all things we’ve thought or felt at some point. They’re the memories and feelings we’ve most repressed because we do not wish to confront them.”

“Yep. That’s why it feels so disgusting like the voice is trampling all over our hearts.”

“Mmm... This is why I hate labyrinths.”

Tio’s conjecture was right on the mark. No one saw any reason to refute it. Even if they didn’t agree verbally like Shea and Yue, everyone’s bitter expressions made it clear that they understood all too well.

“What remains to be seen is whether these truly are our thoughts and feelings, or if the labyrinth has somehow hypnotized or brainwashed us to believe they are.”

It was possible that these weren’t *really* the party’s thoughts, but just close enough that they could get under everyone’s skin and cause them to plausibly believe that they might be. At Tio’s words, Kouki and the others shivered, a kaleidoscope of emotions whirling through them. Kouki was especially affected.

He grimaced, as though he’d swallowed a lump of lead, then his expression clouded over as he lapsed into thought. He looked up, as though searching for a ray of salvation from above. Surprisingly, the next person to react was Shizuku. She spoke to Hajime with forced cheerfulness, as if desperate to avoid talking about her own feelings.

“But it doesn’t seem like the whispers are getting to you guys at all. Are you doing something to drown them out?”

Hajime, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori all exchanged glances.

“Shizuku-chan, those voices are *really* getting under my skin too.”

“Huh?”

Kaori’s response stunned Shizuku. After all, her smile didn’t look troubled at all. Kaori then added, “This whole time, I’ve been feeling reaaaaaaaaaally jealous. I won’t say who, but there’s a certain vampire I wish I could beat to a pulp right now. I won’t say who, though.”

“Fine, Kaori... Bring it. I’ll beat you down.”

Though she was grinning, Kaori’s demonic stand was posing menacingly behind her. Yue turned to her and took a karate stance.

“D-Don’t you think you’re being a little too blunt, Kaori?”

Shizuku and the others were taken aback at how readily Kaori laid bare her dark emotions. But despite the fact that jealousy was a negative emotion, Kaori herself didn’t appear the least bit spiteful or gloomy. The reason for that was simple.

“If I don’t face her head-on, then what’s the point?”

Blades forged by regret and honed by jealousy were stabbing into Kaori’s heart. She’d failed to protect Hajime when she swore she would, and since reuniting with him she’d constantly felt inferior to Yue.

But so what? Kaori had been aware of those feelings long before the labyrinth had started whispering them into her ear. The reason she was standing here now was because she’d already come to terms with them. Having her regrets and failures thrown in her face still hurt, of course, but she wouldn’t break over something like this.

Kouki and the others were dumbfounded. Even Shizuku’s jaw was hanging open. To them, Kaori appeared dazzlingly radiant and pure.

“Those whispers make me feel disgusted too. But now’s not the time to be worrying about them,” Shea said candidly. She, too, had a very simple reason as

to why she could stay so calm. No matter how much she might regret the past, she couldn't fix it. She couldn't go back and undo what had happened. So rather than dwelling on what couldn't be changed, she decided to focus on the future, which could. She may have lost many people dear to her, but there were others she still had left. And she didn't want to lose any more. This wasn't the time to be lamenting her past actions.

"I have not lived so sheltered a life that mere whispers will sway my heart."

Tio shrugged her shoulders casually. In her mind's eye, she saw the flames that had destroyed her home. But no matter how vivid the memories, those flames couldn't burn her. After all these centuries, she'd finally found the miracle she'd been looking for.

Kouki and the others couldn't believe how calm the three girls were. Hajime, however, just smiled gently. He was proud of how far all of them had come. Shizuku then turned to Hajime, a silent question in her gaze. It seemed to Hajime as though she desperately needed an answer for her own peace of mind.

"As for me... Well, the whispering doesn't bother me much."

"It doesn't? But... Nagumo-kun..."

It was obvious to Hajime what Shizuku was trying to say. The group had been sharing what they'd been hearing, so she knew what was being whispered into Hajime's ear.

"There's no place that will accept a monster like you."

"Do you really think a murderer will be able to live a normal life again?"

Those were the things he was hearing. For Hajime, who desired to return home more than anyone, those subconscious fears should have been paralyzing. The thought that he might never be able to return to his old life should have left him plagued with doubts. *There's no way it doesn't bother him. He has to be worried.*

Sensing Shizuku's thoughts, Hajime smiled sadly and said, "I mean yeah, it's painful to hear. I'm not really human anymore. And my morals and stuff are pretty far removed from the average Japanese person. So, yeah... Maybe

somewhere deep inside I'm worried I won't be able to fit in anymore when I get back to Japan."

Hajime's tone was completely casual. There was no sentimentality in his voice, and he clearly wasn't looking for sympathy. He simply analyzed his own feelings in a completely clinical way. It really did seem as though he wasn't bothered at all.

Hearing how easily Hajime, Kaori, and the other girls were able to overcome the darkness in their hearts only caused the darkness within Kouki's to grow stronger. Finally, unable to hold it in any longer, he blurted out, "Then how!? How can you stay so calm!? You want to go home so bad you're willing to abandon the people of this world! Shouldn't the possibility that you might not be welcome terrify you!?"

Kouki's tone was frantic. He was clearly struggling to control himself. His eyes darkened, his muscles tensed, his shoulders trembled, and his breath came in short gasps. The whispers he'd been hearing had shaved away at his mental fortitude a great deal.

Hajime held out a hand to calm him and replied, "It's not that I'm calm, it's just that I know there's no point in worrying about it. I won't know for sure what'll happen when I get back until I do. So for now, I'm just not thinking about it."

"What I'm asking is how you can just cast those thoughts aside so easily! Isn't the labyrinth supposed to be whispering the things that are the hardest for us to ignore!?"

What the heck is eating at him so much? As he yelled, Kouki's eyes seemed to grow darker and darker, hatred, or perhaps anger, swelling within them. Regardless of which emotion was tormenting him, Kouki was clearly beginning to lose it. Shizuku, Ryutarou, Suzu, and Kaori all shot him worried looks. Slowly but surely, their childhood friend was starting to crack, and they were afraid he was going to break. Hajime glanced over at Kaori and smiled wryly to himself. Then his expression grew serious and he turned back to Kouki.

"First, I decide what it is I want. Then, I decide what it is I need to do in order to make that happen."

“What’re you...”

Confused by the sudden change in subject, Kouki gave Hajime a blank look. But Hajime gaze was as firm as iron.

“After that, all that’s left is to do it. There’s no point in worrying about whether I can do it or not. If I have time to worry, I have time to think about what my next move should be. I’ve decided. I’m going to back home to Japan with Yue and everyone. I’m going to show them all the cool things Earth has, and introduce them to my parents. That’s what I’m putting my life on the line for. I don’t have time to care about ‘what ifs’ that even my own subconscious doesn’t have the answers to.”

“That’s crazy. You can’t just...”

“I’m not asking you to agree with me. I know better than anyone I’m just putting the problem off instead of solving it, and that this isn’t a very human line of thought to begin with,” Hajime paused at that, then added, “But that’s still no reason to stop here.”

If Hajime was the kind of person to let his feelings distract him, he would have died long ago in the abyss. He knew separating himself from his emotions like this wasn’t normal. But it was only by learning how to do this that Hajime had been able to crawl out of hell and find things important to him again. And right now, those skills were helping him move forward without hesitation.

“.....”

Unable to argue back, Kouki averted his gaze. No matter what anyone said to him, no matter what anyone did to him, Hajime would not be swayed. Kouki couldn’t bear to see that undying resolve of his. Though Kouki knew he would never be able to understand it, that resolve was nevertheless unbelievably bright. Shizuku, who’d originally posed the question to Hajime, had nothing more to say either. Like Kouki, she found Hajime’s resolve dazzling, but unlike Kouki, she kept her gaze fixed firmly on him. Her usual calm and composed demeanor was gone, and she looked almost lost. She was so absorbed by Hajime that she didn’t even notice her best friend gently watching her from the side.

In the midst of that awkward atmosphere, Shea suddenly blurted out, “Oh

yeah!” Whether she’d been trying to lighten the mood on purpose, or had just naturally ended up doing so, the party’s whimsical bunny girl easily cleared away the fog of dark thoughts that had settled around them.

“So we know the reason Hajime-san’s not affected is because he’s an unfeeling machine, but—”

“Sorry I’m an ‘unfeeling machine.’”

Hajime started pinching Shea’s cheeks, but she ignored him.

“But how come you look like you’re totally fine too, Yue-san? The labyrinth’s whispering to you about the people who betrayed you and trapped you underground for 300 years, isn’t it? Doesn’t that piss you off?”

Hajime was pretty irked at being ignored, but he didn’t really want to derail this particular conversation. He figured he’d just get back at Shea in bed once they cleared this labyrinth. Yue didn’t seem particularly bothered with the fact that the subject had changed to her and answered casually, “Mmm... I’m not as worried about the past as I am about being betrayed again in the future. By you, or Hajime.”

Hajime and Shea exchanged glances. If the whisperings really were manifestations of the party’s inner psyche, it meant somewhere deep down, Yue was actually afraid she’d be betrayed by them. In the past, she’d been betrayed by the family and friends she’d trusted most, and trapped for 300 years in the darkness. An event like that was more than traumatic enough that it wouldn’t have been surprising had Yue been unable to trust people ever again. Fortunately, her meeting with Hajime had taught her to trust again, but that trust was given out very sparingly.

In truth, outside of Hajime, Shea, and a few other people like Kaori, Yue mistrusted everyone by default. It took a lot for her to open up to someone. Only people like Shea, who wore their hearts on their sleeves, Tio, who pushed their way inside people’s hearts without fear of rejection, or Kaori, who were straightforward and unwavering about their feelings, could hope to earn Yue’s trust. But because Yue was so mistrustful by nature, it made sense that deep down she’d be afraid even those people might betray her one day.

“I... thought I’d put the past behind me, but I guess it’s not that easy.”

Considering how massive her betrayal had been, it stood to reason that her memories of it would be difficult to move past. It wasn't that she doubted Hajime and the others, but rather that betrayal had been engraved so deeply into her heart that she couldn't escape such thoughts.

"But now that I think about it, I never really got over it."

"Huh, what do you mean?"

Shea tilted her ears to the side, and Yue casually confessed, her expression perfectly flat, "Actually... when I first crawled out of the abyss, I wished everyone but Hajime would die."

"What!?"

Yue's statement was so shocking that for a moment Kouki and the others forgot about their own troubles. As they were shivering in fear, Hajime dealt the finishing blow.

"Oh yeah, I felt the same way. As long as I had Yue, I didn't really mind killing everyone else if it meant I could go home."

"H-H-H-Hold on a second, does that mean you were thinking those things when you first met me too!?"

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances.

"You were so annoying when we first met you."

"Mmm... I'm surprised we didn't kill you."

Both of them gave Shea looks of extreme pity.

"Shea, you were lucky."

"Yeah, you were lucky."

"Why are you two always in sync like this!?"

Shea's ears flopped back and forth wildly. Only now did she realize she'd literally risked her life to ask Hajime for help. Smiling gently at the three of them, Kaori took a stab at expressing Yue's feelings.

"So what you're trying to say is that you know for a fact that Shea and Hajime would never betray you, Yue?"

“I certainly could not imagine Master ever betraying her. Indeed, I would be more likely to believe you if you told me the world was ending tomorrow than if you said Master would betray Yue.”

Looking at the duo’s diabetes-inducing saccharine-sweet flirting, it was hard to imagine Hajime ever betraying Yue, no matter the circumstances.

“Mmm... Exactly. But even if he did betray me, that would be fine.”

Yue nodded to Kaori and Tio. She then turned to Hajime with a playful smile and added that last hypothetical.

“What do you mean?” Hajime asked, cocking his head. Shea and the others looked confused as well.

Yue casually replied, “Because regardless of how Hajime feels, I won’t ever let him out of my grasp.”

Shivers ran down everyone’s spine. In the silence that followed, Yue licked her crimson lips seductively, staring straight at Hajime. The gesture was so captivating that everyone couldn’t help but stare. And everyone, both boys and girls, felt something carnal stir within them. With a passionate sigh, Yue chuckled and said, “Fufu, you can never escape from a vampire.”

A declaration like that was more than enough to blow away Hajime’s sense of reason. That being said, they were still in a labyrinth.

“Not on my watch!”

Using her superhuman reflexes, Shea pinned Yue’s arms behind her back.

“Well done, Shea!”

“Hajime-kun, come back to your senses! If you do something like that in a mirror house... everyone’ll see everything!”

Tio and Kaori also jumped in to hold Yue and Hajime back.

“That’s not the problem here, Kaori,” Shizuku muttered, reluctantly jumping into the fray herself. *Don’t these people realize we’re in the middle of a labyrinth?*

“Fufu...”

“Ah, jeez! Yue-san, stop provoking Hajime-san!”

Shea’s screams echoed through the winding maze of mirrors.



Chapter III: Charging Emotions

Shizuku sat in her familiar seat by the window, staring blankly at her elementary school classroom. She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open. Her limbs felt heavy. Were it not for the laws of physics, she would have melted through her chair, into the ground, and lay there forever.

“I think Shizuku-chan should be the one!”

“Huh!?” Shizuku jumped as she heard her name called. But then she settled back down and remembered they were in the middle of homeroom. And today they were deciding on the cast members for the class play.

“Yaegashi-san, what do you think? Do you want to do it? Shirasaki-san seems to think you’d be a perfect fit,” Shizuku’s homeroom asked gently.

Oh yeah, I really liked this teacher’s smile. Shizuku thought absently, her teacher’s question going in one ear and out the other.

“Come on, Shizuku-chan! You’ve gotta do it! You’ve gotta be the princess!”

“K-Kaori?”

Watching her best friend look excitedly at her finally brought Shizuku back to her senses. The play they were doing was as cliched as they came. A tale of princesses and knights and dragons. The beautiful but timid princess gets saved by the knight after a long and arduous adventure and the two fall in love.

Why does she want me to play the princess? Shizuku didn’t need to think long to figure out the answer. Rather, it was obvious from the start. Kaori was far more perceptive than she let on. She knew that Shizuku secretly loved cute things, and wanted to appear more feminine than she did.

“But...”

“You’d look really cute in a princess’ dress! Come on, don’t you want to make some memories in our last year of elementary school?”

There was a school play every year, but never once had Shizuku played such a

cute and girly role. Half-unsure, half-embarrassed, and just a little creeped out by her best friend's excited panting, Shizuku fumbled to find a reply. Of course, she was aware that she was secretly happy that Kaori thought she'd make a good princess. And she definitely did want to give it a try. Kaori picked up on Shizuku's inner desires and, straightforward as always, decided to give her one more push.

"Shizuku-chan, if you become the princess, I can play the knight! What do you think!?"

"Um... Well, if that's what—"

Blushing slightly, Shizuku thought to herself, *Maybe I should give it a shot after all.*

"Huh? Shouldn't it be the other way around!?"

It felt as though someone had thrown a bucket of cold water into Shizuku's face. Her classmate's assertion put a damper on her excitement.

"Kaori-chan should be the princess and Shizuku-chan should be the knight!"

"What're you talking about, a guy has to play the knight!"

"Yaegashi-san's way manlier than any of you wimps, so she should do it!"

"Yeah, exactly! She even does kendo, so she's a real swordswoman!"

"I want to see Yaegashi-san dress up as a knight!"

In seconds, everyone else in the classroom was clamoring for Shizuku to play the knight. Kaori got to her feet and started waving her arms wildly, trying her best to convince people that Shizuku should be the princess. But unfortunately, her powers of persuasion were lacking. Tears started welling up in Kaori's eyes, and the homeroom teacher slapped her hands against the podium in an attempt to quiet the students.

"Settle down, everyone. What's most important here is what Yaegashi-san wants. Yaegashi-san, what role do you want to play?"

Though the teacher was smiling kindly, she looked rather stern. Shizuku's stomach felt like lead. Waves of exhaustion washed over her, and she'd lost the will to resist their pull. Shizuku had expected this development. After all, it

wasn't the first time.

"...I want to play the knight."

"Shizuku-chan!?"

Shizuku smiled softly, as though she actually truly did want to play the knight. She then turned to Kaori with a playful grin as she began to speak to her.

"You wouldn't be able to do it, Kaori. You'd just hurt yourself if we let you hold a sword. Even if I played the princess, I'd probably get tired of watching you flail around and go fight myself."

The rest of the classroom started cheering. However, Shizuku would never forget how her homeroom teacher didn't seem nearly as thrilled as the rest of the class. Or the pained, crestfallen look Kaori gave her. *How can you say that with a smile?* her gaze seemed to be saying, a mixture of anger and sadness in her eyes.

Kaori had been so angry that Shizuku had said she'd play the knight that she hadn't talked to her for three days straight after that. But because she was Kaori, she'd also been unable to leave Shizuku's side. So really, it had just been kind of awkward.

Are you really happy, putting everyone's needs before your own? That voice bore through Shizuku's heart, forcing her thought back to the present. She looked up at the dark corridor they were traversing, the hole in her heart growing larger. Fragments of memories tumbled out of that hole, spilling onto the unfeeling ice.

Yaegashi-san, take care of the rest for us! In middle school, Shizuku had responded to those requests with a nod and a "Sure, leave it to me."

Yaegashi-san, you can handle this on your own, right? In high school, Shizuku had responded to those requests with a smile and an "Of course I can."

Shizuku, you can do anything, can't you?

I can't. I really can't. Shizuku thought to herself with a sad smile.

Shizuku, you won't leave me, right?

Stop clinging to me all the time!

At this rate, you'll spend the rest of your life babysitting people, taking care of their problems, and protecting them...

"Stop it!" Shizuku tried to shout. She wanted to drown out the voice resounding inside her head. But those words melted away into a formless darkness, escaping from her lips as only a quiet sigh.

You... No, I am going to end up completely alone... Shizuku could no longer tell if it was the voice saying this, or if she was reliving one of her old memories. Either way, all she could do was keep shouting "That's not true!" inside her head. Suddenly, the voice in her head changed from her own to one belonging to someone she'd once considered a friend.

I hate how you always try to make yourself look better by working so hard. Shizuku suddenly realized the nature of the darkness in her heart. It was her own unease over whether she was truly working so hard for the sake of others. That realization slowly began to coil around her heart, and Shizuku felt her chest tighten up. *I hate this place...* Shizuku cast her gaze about wildly, searching for an exit.

"What...? Who are you?"

There was someone standing next to her.

How long have they been there? The figure was nothing more than an indistinct silhouette; Shizuku couldn't discern any features. But it slowly came into focus, and Shizuku could tell it had a white ponytail, and unforgettable, dark red eyes. The pale figure sneered, its lips forming a thin crescent. It pointed at Shizuku and whispered, *See, you... No, I no longer live in the light.* Shizuku felt as though her heart was stuck in a vice.

"Gooooooooooooood! Cut it ouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuut!"

Shizuku's eyes flew open. For a moment her thoughts were hazy, but then she quickly recalled when and where she was. They were in a small room a few hundred meters from the end of the maze. About three hours had passed since Hajime and Yue had nearly fucked in the hall of mirrors and been physically restrained by Shea. The incessant whispering had worn down on Kouki's mental state, and Hajime had decided to rest here before they confronted whatever lay at the very end of the maze. Shizuku had sat down with her back against the

wall fallen asleep with her head nestled inside her knees. She was covered in cold sweat and felt chilled to the bone. And not because of the temperature outside. She shook her head, trying to banish unwelcome thoughts, and turned to the loud voice which had woken her up. Shea had Hajime in an arm lock and seemed to be yelling at him.

“What’re you doing Shea? You’re going to break my arm.”

“Yeah right, we both know this doesn’t hurt! Also, Yue, if you don’t stop, I’ll hit you with my Heart Breaker Blast for real.”

“Mmm... Sorry. But Hajime just looks so cute when he’s trying to hold himself back.”

“This isn’t the time or the place for this kind of stuff!”

Shea tightened her hold on Hajime, keeping his arms fixed firmly in place. It was a mark of how far she’d come that she could pin down even him. Truly, Hajime was proud of her growth. Shea, however, was too busy making sure Hajime didn’t throw away the last of his dignity to be happy about it.

“Calm down, Shea. I’d never actually have sex here in public.”

“Then why are you giving Yue-san that look, huh?”

“I’m not, you’re just imagining things. I just thought I’d ask Yue to soothe my battered soul. All this whispering’s taken a toll on—”

“Liar! I know that look, Hajime-san. That’s the look you always get when you’re lying!” Shea pointed her finger at Hajime like an ace attorney who’d just found something to object to in the defendant’s argument. Of course, Hajime himself had admitted the voices didn’t bother him much so it was obviously a lie that he needed to recover. In fact, the only thing the whispering seemed to be doing was increasing his desire to fuck Yue, and increasing Yue’s desire to fuck Hajime. In other words, they were both fine. After thinking for a few seconds, Hajime replied with a straight face.

“I need to replenish my supply of Yueinium.”

“I’m gonna punch you for real.”

Shea pinched Hajime’s cheek and gave him a glare that put Yue’s to shame. To

everyone else, it looked as though Shea was flirting with Hajime just as much as Yue was.

“How cruel.”

“I-It’s because I’m your girlfriend too. It’s my job to correct your faults!”

Shea blushed slightly, and Hajime smiled. He appreciated that she wasn’t afraid to scold him still.

“Mmm... Good girl, Shea.”

Yue nodded in satisfaction as well. The two sat in front of Shea and meekly accepted their punishment. *Y-You don’t have to be that repentant.* Shea thought to herself, flustered. Hajime and Yue both smiled at Shea’s adorable reaction.

“Hm, they certainly do seem like lovers.”

“Ahahaha, yeah, they do.”

Tio smiled warmly and Kaori nodded in agreement. At first, it had felt like Shea was always following behind in Hajime and Yue’s shadow. Now that she’d been accepted as Hajime’s girlfriend, though, she was starting to act as though she was on equal footing with them. Instead of trailing behind Hajime and Yue, Shea was now walking side by side with them. In fact, there were even some times where she was the one who pulled the two of them forward instead of the other way around. Like right now. It felt completely natural for the three of them to be together at all times. Though not everyone found that as heartwarming as Tio and Kaori.

“.....”

“Shizushizu? What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Oh, I’m fine. What about you, Suzu? How are you holding up?”

Shizuku’s expression stiffened for a moment, but then she plastered on a smile and turned to Suzu.

“Shizushizu, don’t push yourself too hard. If there’s something bothering you, you can always tell me about it.” Suzu put up a strong front and smiled reassuringly at Shizuku. The whispering was getting to her as well. It felt as

though she was being crushed by the weight of her regrets. Even the simple act of breathing hurt. But even so, she was more worried about Shizuku than herself. It was obvious something was wrong with the way Shizuku was looking at Hajime and the others. They were all smiling happily, but she looked as though she'd swallowed a lemon.

"You're worrying too much, Suzu. Besides, you've got it harder than I do. Are you sure you're alright?"

That response of Shizuku's was exactly why Suzu was so worried. Shizuku was always like this, bottling up her own worries and only concerning herself with others. Even Suzu could tell she was nearly at her breaking point, but even then, Shizuku refused to let others worry about her. She refused to admit she needed help.

Suzu shot Kaori a pleading look, begging her to do something. Kaori met Suzu's gaze. Kaori, too, had been keeping an eye on Shizuku's condition. But instead of doing anything, Kaori just silently shook her head.

Why? Kaorin, why won't you say anything to Shizushizu? Anger welled up within Suzu, but then withered away a second later as she noticed the serious look in Kaori's eyes.

Kaorin would never abandon Shizushizu. I don't know why, but right now she probably thinks no words could possibly help Shizushizu.

Sighing to herself, Suzu nodded forlornly. She then gave Shizuku a troubled smile and said in a cheery voice, "Don't worry about me, Shizushizu, I'm fine." While Shizuku was certainly struggling, the one most in danger of snapping right now was Kouki.

"Hey, Kouki."

"What, Ryutarou?"

"Uh, nothing in particular. I just wish we could get out of this fucking place already."

"Yeah..."

The more they'd traveled, the more taciturn Kouki had gotten. At this point,

even when Shizuku, Ryutarou, or Suzu checked up on him he just gave single-word replies. The dark emotions swirling behind his eyes continued to grow in intensity. They were directed squarely at Hajime.

Though he was doing his best to hide them, Hajime was too sensitive to hostility to miss what was going on. Naturally, he'd been aware of Kouki's piercing glare for a while now. Still, he'd purposely avoided acknowledging it or even talking to Kouki at all. He knew as well as everyone else that saying anything right now would just make things worse. The reason he was fooling around with Yue and Shea was because he wanted to try and lighten the mood as much as possible. Though, part of it was also just because he couldn't stand keeping quiet in this oppressive atmosphere.

"Now then, how is everyone feeling? Are you prepared to continue?"

An hour had passed since their break began. Tio, who'd been using spirit magic to stabilize everyone's mental states, looked over the party members.

"Yes, thank you. My head's clearer now."

"Yeah, I think I feel a little better..."

As far as Hajime could tell, there was no magic contained in the whispers. They were just voices. Whatever psychological effects they were having on the party, magic had nothing to do with them. But not even spirit magic could reverse the mundane effects of the whispers unless the person in question was able to overcome their insecurities. Really, all Tio was doing was helping the party feel a little more refreshed. Even so, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou were grateful for the meager relief Tio's magic gave them. Their smiles were tired, but mostly genuine. However, there was one person who could no longer smile like that.

"Yeah, thanks, Tio-san. I feel great..." Kouki said as he forced a smile. Unfortunately, it was obvious from his dejected tone that he was not feeling fine. His expression was so stiff that even masks had more natural smiles than him. Tio could tell Kouki was only pretending to be fine, but she just clapped him lightly on the shoulder and changed the subject.

"No need for thanks. More importantly, it's about time we leave this maze. Master, you said the remaining distance should take us less than an hour to

cover, correct?”

“Yeah. And that’s if we get sidetracked. From what I can sense off the compass, we’ve got maybe thirty minutes left.”

Hajime pulled the compass out of his pocket and got to his feet. Yue got up as well, realizing that was the signal to leave. Her joking expression was gone, replaced by a serious frown. Like Hajime, she’d just been goofing off to try and lighten the mood. Probably, anyway. As expected, Kouki was slow to rise. But so too were Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou. Nearly a full day had passed since they entered this labyrinth. In that time they’d been through multiple fights, then spent hours tormented by malicious whispers. While they’d been recovering their physical exhaustion as necessary, they hadn’t been able to do anything for their mental exhaustion.

Kouki and the others shambled forward slowly, looking eerily similar to the zombies they’d killed what felt like a lifetime ago. Their tired reflections stared back at them from the polished ice walls, mocking their exhaustion. As they walked, the voices continued whispering unpleasant truths and fears into the ears of the party. Because of their exhaustion, the various traps and ambushes the party faced were more dangerous than they should be. Though Hajime and the others were fine, Kouki’s group were stuck on the defensive even against weak enemies like Frost Ogres.

“Dammnit,” Kouki cursed as Hajime finished off a Frost Ogre that had been giving him trouble. He slammed his fist against the wall.

See, it happened again.

This is why you always get the things important to you stolen away.

If only you had more power.

The whispers continued incessantly. Even when they weren’t there, the words echoed in Kouki’s head anyway, over and over. It felt as though someone was bashing on his skull with a hammer.

In an attempt to vent his frustrations, Kouki unleashed a flurry of attacks against another Frost Ogre. But his anger had made his movements sloppy, and the ogre was able to dodge out of the way. That just caused Kouki to grow more

frustrated, which in turn dulled his movements further, causing an endless negative feedback loop. That, in turn, made Ryutarou, who had to cover for Kouki's mistake, frustrated as well.

"Kouki! Stop charging in and calm down!"

"I am calm!" Kouki barked back. He was barely even paying attention to other people now, and mostly just relying on reflex. Feeling even worse knowing that he was performing so poorly that even his comrades had begun to notice, Kouki turned away. As he did so, he caught sight of his reflection in the ice and froze.

There wasn't anything particularly strange about how he looked. His face was the same face he'd grown used to seeing these past few hours. It was staring blankly back at him. But something bothered him about it.

"What the..." he muttered. Transfixed, he scrutinized his reflection and—

"Ah!?"

A chill ran down his spine. His expression stiffened. His reflection was *staring blankly back at him*. It wasn't scrunching up its eyebrows in irritation and biting its lips like the actual Kouki was. Even though his expression had just stiffened, his reflection hadn't changed at all. It continued staring blankly at him, its black eyes boring into Kouki. Kouki's eyes went wide with surprise, and a second later his reflection sneered at him.

"Waaaaaaaaah!?"

"K-Kouki, what's wrong!?"

"Are you alright, Kouki!?"

Shizuku and Ryutarou turned to him as he yelped and leaped away from the wall. Hajime and the others turned around and readied their weapons.

"Th-There's another enemy!"

Cold sweat poured down Kouki's back. Panting, he raised his Holy Sword and pointed it at the reflection of him in the wall. It was pointing its sword back at him, shoulders heaving. It had stopped moving differently than the real Kouki.

"Kouki?"

Confused, Shizuku walked over to Kouki. She gently placed a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down. Kouki twitched, but then relaxed a little when he realized the hand belonged to his longtime friend.

Steadying his breathing, Kouki managed to squeeze out, “My-My reflection was smiling. Even though I wasn’t smiling... it smiled at me. It was like another person was in the ice...”

“Are you sure you weren’t just seeing things?” Shizuku gulped and stared warily at Kouki’s reflection. However, Kouki was no longer interested in his reflection. He turned to Shizuku and said irritably, “You don’t believe me?”

“Huh? No, it’s not that.”

Kouki seemed to have interpreted Shizuku’s words as a lack of trust in him. Of course, that wasn’t why Shizuku had asked. She’d just wanted to double-check. It was obvious from how vigilantly she was watching the wall that she believed Kouki. In fact, she hadn’t even taken her eyes off it to respond to him. Hence it was only natural that she was confused by the hostility in Kouki’s voice.

Unfortunately, the fact she didn’t meet Kouki’s gaze only served to anger him further. Voice dripping with jealousy, Kouki snarled, “You would have believed Nagumo right away.”

“Kouki, what are you talking about? I just said I believe you.”

This time, Shizuku did turn back to Kouki. Though she was normally able to brush most things off, this was enough to elicit an eyebrow raise. But the moment she saw Kouki’s strained expression, she went from angry to worried.

“Sorry, Shizuku. I—”

Her worried expression was enough to clear away a little of the fog that had settled over Kouki’s thoughts. But a second later, he clammed up again as he saw Shizuku’s expression morph. The labyrinth must have whispered something to her since her shoulders started trembling, and she clutched her chest as though she’d been stabbed through. She glanced up for a second, seeking something. And from where she was standing, the only thing in sight was Hajime. Even if she didn’t say anything, that gesture alone was enough to make Kouki crack. All the dark feelings he’d bottled up started oozing out.

“Whatever that was... it doesn’t look like it’s going to attack yet. But we should still be careful,” Hajime, who’d been observing the walls with his Demon Eye, sighed and gave the all-clear. Kaori and Suzu, who’d been watching Kouki and Shizuku’s exchange with great trepidation, nodded and resumed walking.

There were no other incidents of reflections acting on their own, and the party finally exited the corridor of ice mirrors into a wide open space. Hajime checked his compass, confirming that this was indeed the end of the maze.

At the other side of the circular room was a set of double doors just as grand and magnificent as the one they’d passed through to get in here. Actually no, the doors were twice as large as the other ones. In fact, they were more like gates than doors. There were no depressions to insert any jewels or any fancy flower embroidery, but there was something else carved into the gates that was just as impressive and artistic. An entire mural, composed of multiple layers, spanning the length of the gates. At the top was the sun, and below a series of layers showcasing humans, animals, nature, and everything in between.

Different layers represent different things, like the light of the sky, or the darkness of hell... Is this mural supposed to be symbolic of the human heart? Judging by how elaborate both this and the earlier set of doors had been, Vandrew Schnee had been quite the artist. And like all artists, Vandre had wanted to convey a message with his art. Meaning it was entirely possible this mural provided some hints as to what trial lay ahead. Hajime kept that in mind as he cast his gaze about the room.

“Looks like we’re finally here. Past that gate’s our goal.”

Kouki and the others looked visibly relieved. However—

“Mmm... It looks suspicious.”

“Yeah, I’m getting a really bad feeling about this. That snow mist hasn’t done anything yet. I’m sure it wasn’t put here just for show.”

“You said it. Besides, every time we’ve gone into a wide-open room we’ve been attacked by something.”

“If anything, these rooms are probably made purposely big so we can fight in them.”

Indeed, the size of the room made it obvious that they wouldn't be able to reach those doors unmolested. Hajime fully believed that as well, but even now his Demon Eye still wasn't able to sense anything out of the ordinary.

"I still don't sense a thing... Guess our only option is to keep going and find out."

Shaking his head, Hajime took the lead. Yue and the others followed behind him. As expected, something happened the moment they reached the center of the room.

"Huh? Is that a sun?"

Bright light poured into the room, and Hajime looked up. Yue and the others followed suit. Whatever was up there was definitely a sun of some sort. Considering they were still inside the labyrinth, it obviously wasn't the real sun. But it gave off heat as well as light, so "sun" was the only word that fit. At the very least, whatever it was, it was modeled to function like a sun.

"...Hajime!"

Hajime turned his attention away from the artificial sun and looked back down. An otherworldly sight spread out before him. Everything in the room was sparkling. The mist of snow that had descended closer to the ground and minuscule crystals of snow shimmered as they caught the sun's light. *So that's why they call it diamond dust.*

But compared to the diamond dust phenomena that occurred naturally, this one was far too bright. It looked as though the milky way had been miniaturized and recreated within this room. The ice crystals continued growing brighter as well until each one was a sun unto itself. They started congregating together, forming larger shards instead of crystals. Though it was truly a spectacular sight, Hajime didn't have time to enjoy it. Whatever was happening was dangerous. Each shard of ice was a charged laser of energy, and there was no telling when they would fire.

"Guess this is a bit too lethal to really call diamond dust. Everyone, brace for impact!"

Trusting his instincts, Hajime shouted out a warning. That served to bring

Kouki and the others back to their senses. The party huddled together, and Yue and Suzu both deployed their strongest Hallowed Grounds. A second later, the shards emitted a series of white flashes.

“Ngh, they’re like lasers!”

Hundreds of beams of superhot white light shot toward the party. The shards were absorbing energy from the sun, focusing it, and shooting it back out. The lasers were potent enough to crack even Yue and Suzu’s double-layered Hallowed Ground.

“This is just like Nagumo-kun’s laser weapon!”

Shizuku was referring to Hyperion, the weapon Hajime had used to obliterate a section of the plains outside the capital. Recalling the power it had exhibited sent chills down Shizuku’s spine. For some reason, Hajime grinned when he heard that.

“Yeah. Is this Oscar’s? Can’t believe a guy who lived thousands of years ago was a better craftsman than me. Damn this guy had skills.”

“This isn’t the time to be praising him!” Kouki screamed. Justifiably so. That being said, Hajime was right. This laser was more powerful than his own. The lasers bounced from shard to shard and were redirected by the perfectly polished ice walls, so it was impossible to predict their trajectories. Hajime and the others were trapped inside a three-dimensional spiderweb of superheated light. There was nowhere for them to go. All that was left was for them to either be pierced through or incinerated.

In this situation, the smaller, more versatile beams of light truly were more dangerous than Hyperion’s massive burst. To make matters worse, it seemed Hajime and the others had a time limit. More and more ice crystals were descending by the minute. In seconds, the air would be so full of them that even Haltina’s fog would seem thin. Theoretically, lasers weakened when passing through the atmosphere. Especially when that atmosphere was polluted with smoke or dust. Which was why for a moment Hajime thought the descending snow crystals would weaken the lasers, but...

“There’s no way they’d set up a trap that dumb.”

Hajime shook his head.

“Once the rest of the crystals obstruct our vision, we’ll be in trouble. We’re getting out of here now!”

At Hajime’s command, everyone sprung into action. The lasers continued pounding on Yue and Suzu’s barriers, weakening them by the second. However —

“You two focus on maintaining the barrier! Transient Infinity!”

Kaori’s restoration spell continued returning the barrier to its original state every second, transforming it from merely sturdy to invincible. Hajime then used Riftwalk to help him calculate the trajectories of the lasers, and started shooting down the shards that were keeping the party trapped. It was only a few hundred meters to the goal. However, Hajime knew labyrinths weren’t so easily overcome. There was bound to be at least one more obstacle. As expected, a series of large ice chunks rained down from the mist above. Each was the size of a car. They fell to the ground with heavy thuds, blocking the path in front of Hajime and the others. The impacts left craters in the ground and sent cracks running through the ice. Like the walls, the ice chunks were transparent enough to see through. They were, of course, no ordinary ice chunks. The crimson mana crystals embedded in their centers made that abundantly clear.

“Tch, so this is the real test, huh?”

Hajime clicked his tongue in irritation. Cracks ran down the length of the blocks of ice, and they rearranged themselves into a new shape. They now looked like five-meter tall giants. Like golems, their bodies were stout and squat. Each was armed with a one-handed halberd.

There were nine ice golems in total. The same number of people in Hajime’s party. With how massive they were, they completely blocked the path to the exit when they lined up in a row.

“Beat the shit out of them.”

The snow mist was barely a few inches above their heads now. They already had to deal with the storm of lasers; if they were blinded by fog as well, they

wouldn't be able to fight for long. Hajime instantly took aim at a Frost Golem and fired. A red streak shot out of Donner. However, the golem blocked the shot with its tower shield. While Hajime's bullet pierced right through it, it wasn't able to reach all the way to the golem's mana crystal and stopped just short.

"Those shields aren't made of normal ice."

That was the first time in this labyrinth that a single shot from Hajime hadn't been enough to kill something. While the Frost Golems' defensive prowess was admirable, what was even more impressive was that Hajime's enhanced Donner had been able to blow straight through the tower shield of a monster designed solely for defense. Still, it was undeniable that these golems were unnaturally tough.

A moment later, everyone but Suzu and Yue followed up with their own attacks.

"If one attack's not enough, then how about a dozen!?"

"Do you truly believe mere ice can withstand my breath?"

Shea transformed Drucken into bombardment mode and launched a barrage of shells while Tio thrust her hands forward and let loose her blistering dragonbreath. At the same time, Shizuku also stepped forward.

"It would be nice if Flash Blitz was ranged, but this will have to do— Sonic Slice!"

"Your Flash Blitz is so good its scary, Shizuku-chan."

"I think your disintegration feathers are a lot scarier, Kaori. In fact, speaking from experience, they definitely are."

Shizuku let loose a blast of wind while Kaori unloaded a ray of pure disintegration. Ryutarou and Kouki joined in as well, with Ryutarou firing off mana shockwaves and Kouki launching his blasts of light. But all of their attacks were aimed at their allies.

"Ah!?"

Taken completely by surprise, Hajime gasped. He hadn't expected any attacks

to come his way while the barrier still stood. Especially not from such close range. Kouki's Celestial Flash and Ryutarou's mana shockwaves were inches from his face.

"Tch!"

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. In the brief moment of time he had left, he crossed his arms together and activated Diamond Skin.

Kouki and Ryutarou's attacks slammed into him. Thanks to his last-minute block, he was able to come out unscathed, but the force of their blows still sent him flying outside of the barrier. In that moment, he regretted ever strengthening Kouki and Ryutarou's weapons. It was fortunate he'd already had Riftwalk activated. Had that not given him the enhanced reflexes he'd needed to guard in time, he would have taken significant damage.

As he was blown away, Hajime was still able to shoot down Shizuku's Sonic Slice, which was aimed directly at Shea's back. Then, what seemed a full few seconds later to Hajime's enhanced senses, he heard Kaori scream.

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" She forcibly wrenched her hand away at the last second, preventing her disintegration beam from firing toward Yue. The attack was so unexpected that Yue wasn't able to react in time, and Kaori's beam ripped straight through the roof of her Hallowed Ground. The only way Yue could have stopped an attack that powerful was focusing her mana to strengthen only that point. However, Yue was still skilled enough to maintain the rest of her barrier. Suzu's, on the other hand, shattered completely as Kaori's beam tore through it, causing her to squeal in surprise. Hajime skid across the ground, his feet leaving deep furrows in the ice.

"Huh?" Kouki was the first to speak, his dumbfounded voice echoing through the wide room. His jaw was hanging open, and it was clear he was just as shocked by what he'd done as Hajime. Ryutarou and Shizuku were the same. "H-Hey guys, what's wrong with you!?" Suzu yelled as she hurriedly recast Hallowed Ground. But none of her comrades responded.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?"

"How bold of you, Kaori..."

“Sh-Shizuku-san? Did I do something to make you mad?”

The Frost Golems were bearing down on the party, and the snow mist was growing ever closer to engulfing them. There wasn't much time for a lengthy discussion, but there was no way Hajime, Yue, and Shea were just going to let this slide. All while dodging lasers and slowing down the Frost Golems with bullets and grenades, Hajime turned to Kouki with a serious look and asked, “What was that?”

Yue also turned to Kaori and muttered, “Now you're asking for it...” Shea, on the other hand, looked completely stunned and shouted, “Does Shizuku-san hate me!?” to no one in particular. Finally, Kouki and the others returned to their senses.

“I-It's not what you think! I wasn't trying to hit you! But before I knew it, I... You've gotta believe me!”

“Y-Yeah, it was the same for me! I'd never try to hit you on purpose, Nagumo!”

“I'm sorry, Shea! I don't know why that happened! I was trying to hit the Frost Golems, but...”

The three of them desperately tried to clear their names. From the sound of it, they'd unconsciously changed targets at the last second.

“Yue, I'm really sorry! But I'm kind of always shooting disintegration beams at you, so let's just focus on the problem at hand right now!”

“That doesn't make it okay, stupid!”

It certainly was true that whenever Yue and Kaori got into an argument that they inevitably started throwing disintegration beams and thunder dragons at each other. But Yue could regenerate from anything, even disintegration, and Kaori was sturdy enough that Yue's lightning dragons did little more than singe her hair. Kaori ignored Yue's indignant glare and turned to Hajime with a serious expression.

“Hajime-kun, I think we were *made* to aim at each other. Right before I attacked, I heard that voice in my head again.”

Still using her breath to keep the Frost Golems at bay, Tio quickly came up with the most plausible explanation.

“This could be dangerous, Master. The labyrinth is likely interfering with our subconscious. Those whispers have been imprinting commands onto us.”

“Tch... That explains why they all attacked different people. I guess there’s no way to break the spell either, huh...?”

“As these subconscious effects are not magic-induced, it would be difficult to remove them.”

The whispers were a form of hypnotic suggestion. And they’d been building up for this very moment. In fact, it was possible everything from the long, winding maze, to the constant surprise attacks had all been part of an elaborate plan to weaken challengers’ mental states in order to make the subconscious imprinting easier. Furthermore, now that they’d attacked their own allies once, the imprinting was complete. It was likely Kouki and the others would end up subconsciously targeting their allies again. The only reason such imprinting hadn’t worked on Hajime, Yue, Tio, and Shea was because the whispers they’d been hearing hadn’t been directing them to a specific target.

Had the whispers been magically taking control of people’s minds, restoration magic would have been able to bring them back to normal. But they weren’t. It was all psychological manipulation. In a sense, Kouki and the others were doing this partly of their own free will. Aside from time, the only thing that could cure this was erasing the memories of the past few hours from everyone’s minds. While Hajime was still trying to think of a counterstrategy, the snow mist finally descended to eye level. The fog of gray ice crystals obstructed Hajime’s sight, and his vision grew blurry. At this point, Kouki and the others’ attacks had been sealed, and no matter how much damage Hajime and Tio inflicted on the Frost Golems, they regenerated within seconds. Worse, the fog had amplified the number of lasers bouncing around. Hajime was out of patience.

“God, this is annoying...”

There was only one thing to do.

“Fine, I’ll blow it all up at once!”

Hajime withdrew Orkan from his Treasure Trove and fired. Nine streaks of light shot out of the rocket launcher, one headed to each of the Frost Golems. The resulting explosions blew away not only the golems, but also the surrounding snow mist, and the shards of reflective ice. Because of how close the explosion was, the shockwaves also sent cracks running through Suzu's Hallowed Ground, causing her to squeal in surprise again. Hajime shouldered Orkan and nodded appreciatively. But as the smoke cleared, his satisfied expression froze, and his lips twitched. Another set of ice blocks descended to the ground with an earth-shaking thud. The mist reformed around them as well, and the shattered shards of ice recombined. It seemed neither the mist nor the shards could be blown away by simple explosions.

"Ah, Hajime-san! There's one less now!"

"I get it now. Each of us has to destroy one. That's the only way to get rid of them all."

Like Shea had said, there were only eight Frost Golems now. Considering there had originally been as many as there were people in Hajime's party, it made sense that the number meant something.

"Then I'll get the next one!" Kouki roared as he fired off a Celestial Flash once more. But despite his best efforts, his attack once again headed toward Hajime instead of the golems. This time Hajime saw it coming and casually leaned back to avoid it. Kouki paled as he watched his attack miss entirely. Ryutarou and Shizuku winced as well. Even Ryutarou couldn't bring himself to act cheerful in this situation.

Unable to hide her irritation, Suzu yelled impatiently, "So what are we going to do!?"

The shimmering grey veil of snow was about to block their vision entirely, and Suzu's mana was running low. Finally, the mist thickened, and Hajime vanished from everyone's sight. It even managed to slip inside the barrier, making it impossible for Suzu to even make out Yue, who was right next to her. Realizing they didn't have much time, Hajime made his decision. He shouted loudly enough to be heard through the thick mist, "Don't hesitate! Fire off everything you've got!"

Both the mist and the psychological manipulation were trials the labyrinth had prepared for them. Meaning even if Kouki and the others couldn't see him, he had a hunch that their attacks would end up directed at him anyway. In fact, he was sure of it. That was the only way it made sense for these two trials to exist simultaneously. Chances were only the attacks directed at their own allies would be perfectly accurate. But that was precisely what Hajime was hoping for. Kouki, Ryutarou, Shizuku, and Kaori's targets were Hajime, Yue, and Shea. The three of them were strong enough that they could handle their allies attacks no problem.

"Well, if they'd ended up aiming at anyone aside from us three... we might have been in trouble."

Hajime shrugged his shoulders as the mist blocked not only his vision, but even his ability to sense Yue and the others. At the end of the day, they'd chosen to challenge this labyrinth of their own volition. He couldn't babysit them through the whole thing. If they couldn't handle setbacks like this on their own, they weren't worthy to learn this labyrinth's magic to begin with. After all, Hajime had been covering their asses for them thus far.

Just then, a series of lasers cut through the mist and headed straight for him. As he'd expected, the mist hadn't done anything to weaken lasers' force. If anything they were even more dangerous now since Hajime couldn't follow their trajectories. But even though he barely had any time to dodge, Hajime was easily able to lean backward and avoid the lasers with the minimal amount of movement. He'd been dodging them without looking at them ever since he'd been knocked out of the barrier, after all. With Riftwalk active, having his sight restricted posed little threat to him. Especially since the lasers were hot enough that his Heat Detection skill could sense their approach.

"Now then, what should I do?"

If defeating your assigned Frost Golem is what this trial's about, then I've already cleared my part. I hope I don't have to just sit here dodging lasers while everyone else takes down theirs. Hajime examined his surroundings with a frown. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a section of the mist begin to swirl.

Thinking another enemy was making its entrance, Hajime stowed Orkan and switched back to Donner and Schlag. But he needn't have worried. The spiral formed into a horizontal tornado, creating a tunnel clear of mist. No lasers aimed for the tunnel. Furthermore, the tunnel headed straight for the gates at the other end of the room. Shrugging, Hajime stepped into the tunnel. As he did so, he glanced over his shoulder and muttered, "I told you not to hesitate..."

No flashes of light or shockwaves of mana had come his way.

"Well, if that's what you've decided..."

Hajime turned back around and strode into the tunnel.

Meanwhile, Yue and the others had been split apart. The moment the mist had blocked their vision, the ground underneath them had erupted. Kouki and the others had either jumped out of the way to avoid the eruption, or been blown away by it. Either way, they no longer knew where anyone was.

"Shizuku-chan, Suzu-chan! Ryutarou-kun! Kouki-kun!"

Kaori shouted her friends' names, worried for their safety. Though she couldn't sense where they were at all, she could barely hear Shizuku yelling back, "We'll be fine! Worry about yourself!" from somewhere above her. A few seconds later, Suzu, Ryutarou, Kouki, and even Shea and Yue called out to let her know they were safe. Kaori breathed a sigh of relief. A moment later, she felt a chill run down her spine and she reflexively wrapped her wings around herself. Four lasers slammed into her wings, dissipating as they came into contact with them. At the same time—

"The mist..."

The nearby mist thinned, leaving a small dome-shaped area around her clear. At the other end of the clearing was a single Frost Golem. *So this is my opponent.*

An enemy of this caliber would normally be no threat to her. However—

"I can still hear it."

The moment she tried to attack, she once again heard whispering in her ear.

And once again, her hand ended up pointing in the wrong direction. She doubted every one of her attacks would end up redirected, but even so the fact that she kept targeting Yue pained her. Not because she was worried Yue couldn't take the attacks, but because of what it said about herself. While Kaori was hesitating, the Frost Golem made its move. Rather than close the distance between them, it chucked its tower shield at her.

“Wawawah,” Kaori shouted, and dodged out of the way. The Frost Golem followed up with a charge and swung its halberd down at her. Kaori knew she wouldn't be able to dodge this attack in time, and summoned her greatsword to block it. The golem's halberd struck her sword with such force that the ground underneath her cracked, and her feet sunk a few inches into the ice. But that was all. Even one of the labyrinth's strongest monsters couldn't hope to do any real damage to her, now that she had the body of a God's Apostle.

“Now you're mine!”

Kaori summoned her second greatsword and wreathed it in an aura of disintegration. She tried to slash horizontally at the golem, but—

“What!?”

Her body did a pirouette, and she ended up slashing in a completely different direction. A shockwave of silver light shot out of her blade, even though she hadn't intended it to. In the distance, she heard Yue shout, “Kaori... don't hold back! Because I won't either!”

She's really mad now, isn't she?

Kaori's expression stiffened, and she shouted, “S-Sorry!”

At the same time, she felt something aim for her head, and she reflexively turned around and raised her other sword to block. This time she imbued it with disintegration power, so when the golem's halberd hit her sword, it was torn in half. She then once again sliced horizontally with her second sword, and this time her attack went where it was supposed to. Unfortunately, she was only able to cut through the golem's regenerating tower shield and not its mana crystal. With surprising agility, the Frost Golem backstepped to safety.

“It's so annoying not knowing which attacks will be redirected...” Kaori

groaned to herself. A second later, she heard Yue's thunder dragon roar in the distance.

"Did Yue finish already? In that case, I don't have to... Ah!" Kaori was thinking if Yue didn't have any other enemies to fight she'd be fine even if Kaori hit her with a few attacks, but then she suddenly realized something. Her full-powered disintegration attacks could end this battle in an instant, but she was hesitating to use them because they might get redirected.

But if I use that redirection to my advantage instead... After all, it's just Yue I'll be hitting!

She pointed her sword forward in order to launch another disintegration beam and, as expected, her hands automatically shifted to point toward Yue. Kaori then circled around, keeping her arm pointed in the same spot. Once she'd measured the correct angle she shouted, "Yue, forty-five degrees!"

Then, without hesitation, she fired a full-power blast. A beam of silver light cut through the veil of snow, disintegrating everything in its path. It then turned sharply, and headed straight for the Frost Golem Kaori was fighting.

"...!"

Though it had no mouth, it almost looked like the Frost Golem screamed. Its expression was visible for only a moment before Kaori's beam obliterated it entirely, leaving not even dust behind. Kaori could still hear fighting in the distance, and she kept her guard up as she observed the spot the Frost Golem had been standing.

The mist around her swirled into a horizontal tornado, creating a tunnel. No other Frost Golems came to block her path. It seemed her trial was over.

"Phew, thank—" Kaori suddenly shut her mouth. Perhaps it was because they'd worked together to beat Kaori's golem, but Kaori's tunnel connected to Yue's before heading to the gate. The glare Yue gave Kaori was cold enough to make their surroundings seem warm. In front of Yue was the Heavensfall she had used to redirect Kaori's beam. With just the number, Yue had guessed what Kaori had intended and reacted accordingly. Naturally, Kaori hadn't doubted for a moment that Yue would pull through. It was obvious from that earlier exchange that the two trusted each other completely.

That being said... Yue let her Heavensfall dissipate, then beckoned with one finger to Kaori. Though she didn't say anything, her expression made it clear she wanted Kaori to hurry up and get over there so she could administer her punishment.

"I-I know, I'm coming..."

Resigning herself to her fate, Kaori strode down the tunnel.



“Ah, jeez, not again!” Shizuku shouted in frustration. Before she could let loose a string of expletives, a massive halberd bore down on her and she had to jump out of the way. Because the Frost Golem had attacked her right after she’d fired off an attack in the wrong direction, her dodge was sloppy. The halberd’s blade passed millimeters from her face, shaving off a few strands of her bangs as it passed. As she fell backward, Shizuku used her momentum to roll back into a standing posture, then sucked in a huge breath. But there was no time to rest, since she had to deal with a barrage of lasers heading straight for her right away.

“Ngh!”

Normally, dodging so many would be impossible. However, Shizuku analyzed the situation instantly and leaped backward. Lasers grazed her back and face, passing by so closely that she could feel their heat on her skin. Though she managed the impossible and dodged the matrix of lasers, Shizuku still had no time to rest.

The Frost Golem charged at her, its tower shield raised high. Naturally, none of the lasers hindered its path. Up close, the shield that was as high as Shizuku was tall looked like a moving wall. This time Shizuku was out of options. She had no way of dodging the Frost Golem’s shield tackle. Because of how large the golem was, the charge had quite a bit of force behind it too.

“Gah!”

Shizuku rolled with the tackle to lessen the impact, but she was unable to neutralize it entirely. Gritting her teeth, she grunted in pain. But she refused to let the Frost Golem get a follow-up attack. Even as she flew backward she drew her sword.

“Soar - Sonic Slice!”

Unfortunately, Shizuku’s attack went far right of where she’d intended. While she hadn’t had time to aim, she knew that wasn’t the reason for such a bad miss.

“Shit!” she shouted. Chances were, her attack was once again headed for Shea. Once the battle had begun Shea had yelled out, “Hajime-san’s right,

there's nothing you need to feel bad about!" But that didn't make Shizuku feel any better about attacking her comrades. Ashamed of herself, Shizuku was too wrapped up in her thoughts to properly brace herself for landing. As she hit the ground she felt the wind get knocked out of her. Still, she hurried to her feet as fast as possible.

"I guess I can't rely on ranged attacks here..."

They left her too open if she missed. And in a battle like this, where even fractions of seconds mattered, those openings were fatal. Besides, it was only causing her more emotional damage knowing she kept accidentally harming her friend. What bothered her even more, though, was what her attacks toward Shea suggested.

The truth is, you're jealous of her, aren't you? When it was whispered into her ear like that, she couldn't deny it any longer.

"Gah! Sh-Shut up!"

Shizuku coughed up a few drops of blood. Her internal organs had been damaged. Knowing that a prolonged battle would only put her at a disadvantage, she wiped the blood from her lips and took her stance.

Why is it always me?

"I told you to shut up!" Shizuku yelled at the top of her lungs, unable to hide her frustration. She backstepped out of the way of the thundering Frost Golem, but she couldn't hide the disturbance in her heart. And this labyrinth was a master of taking advantage of that. Distracted as she was, Shizuku didn't notice the laser headed toward her until it was too late. It brushed by her shoulder, burning her skin.

"Ah!"

The pain brought her back to her senses, and she saw another laser closing in on her from below. It was angled diagonally so that it would cut her in two if it actually hit her. Unfortunately, the attack that had grazed her shoulder had knocked her off-balance. She wasn't in any position to dodge, so instead, she twisted her body to minimize the area of impact. She then thrust her katana forward, interposing it between her and the laser. *Please don't break.* Shizuku

prayed fervently, hoping her katana could withstand a laser capable of cracking a double-layered Hallowed Ground. While her katana had been made from the hardest material in existence, it was also very thin in order to keep the blade sharp. It was a gamble whether or not it would hold.

“Huh?”

The fact that Shizuku wasn't screaming in pain meant it had. Once again, she'd escaped the jaws of death. Not only had the katana saved its master, but it also had *deflected* the laser instead of blocking it. The Frost Golem, relentless as ever, gave Shizuku no time to ponder the implications of that as it charged forward with its halberd. Clamping down on her emotions, Shizuku concentrated her attention on the enemy at hand. Filling her lungs with oxygen and determination, she leaped forward, moving faster than before. She avoided the Frost Golem's halberd by moving close to the golem's own shield, then launched her strongest attack as she dashed past.

“Cut through— Flash Blitz!”

Her attack landed, and she cut through both the tower shield, and the arm holding it. Keeping her guard up, she watched as a barrage of lasers assaulted her yet again. But this time, she wouldn't be shaken.

“Gather— Confluence!”

Shizuku raised her katana high, and the lasers all changed trajectories to head toward it. Once again, her beloved black blade reflected them all. And that wasn't all. It gathered a few of the lasers together, combining them into a single mega-laser. It then fired the mega-laser at the Frost Golem just as it started to turn around. Unable to ignore this new threat, the Frost Golem raised its halberd in an attempt to defend itself.

This is it. If I don't settle things here, I won't get another chance. She activated her strongest evolution spell, Limiter Removal. Her reflexes, senses, and abilities all grew exponentially, and her body felt as light as a feather. Feeling invigorated, she leveled her katana at the golem. Of course, she kept it angled so the mega-laser continued blasting through it. While it was pinned down by the laser, she unbuckled her sheath and thrust it forward. In a way, it looked like she was drawing a bowstring.

A second later, she used No Tempo and Flash Step to lunge forward with no warning. Her speed and lack of preparatory movements made it look as though she'd disappeared.

“Shatter - Shock Slugger!”

Shizuku thrust her sheath forward, giving the Frost Golem no time to react. She weaved between the golem's halberd and remaining arm and slammed her sheath directly into its chest. Blue shockwaves of mana spread out from the point of impact. The sheath pushed in all the way to where the mana crystal was, and deep cracks ran through the golem's body. The force of the blow caused the golem to stagger backward. Taking advantage of this decisive opening, Shizuku followed-up with an all-out attack.

“Soar - Severance! Crush - Gravity Flash!”

Shizuku fully deflected the laser, then unleashed a powerful cut. This one was aimed at the golem's legs. A second later, the Frost Golem floated a few inches into the air.

Gravity Flash was a gravity-magic based attack that removed whatever it touched from the pull of gravity for a few seconds, making it weightless.

“...!”

Confused by what was happening to it, the Frost Golem flailed wildly. Unfortunately, there was nothing for it to grab onto to anchor itself with.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a spirited yell, Shizuku lifted the golem up, using the sheath as a fulcrum. She then leaned forward and slammed the golem down on the ground. Gravity Flash severed gravity's pull on the target only in the spot in which it was cast. Meaning gravity once again reasserted itself once the golem was over Shizuku's shoulder, and it amplified the force of her throw. The impact with the ground was more than enough to drive Shizuku's sheath all the way into the golem. At least, far enough to reach the mana crystal.

“It's over! Shock Slugger!”

Waves of blue mana spread out from the sheath, signaling the end for the

Frost Golem. Unable to withstand such force at point blank range, the mana crystal inside it shattered, the noise surprisingly soft for how big it was. Bereft of its heart, the Frost Golem silently crumpled to the floor. Panting, Shizuku muttered, “Haaah... Haaah... Looks like I’m still not strong enough to fight on my own.”

She leaned forward, using her sheath as a crutch, and smiled self-deprecatingly. Considering she’d just defeated one of the labyrinth’s most powerful monsters under highly adverse conditions, she probably could have stood to take more pride in her achievement. But when she saw that Hajime, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori were already all waiting at the end of the tunnel, she couldn’t help but feel inferior.

Unlike her, they looked like they hadn’t even struggled against their opponents. Shizuku looked down at her own ragged clothes, then sheathed her katana with a satisfying *snick*.

It was her personal ritual for signifying the end of combat, and it helped ease the frustration inside her a little. A bit more relaxed, Shizuku looked down at her hand.

“But well... I guess I wasn’t really alone, huh?”

Both the reason she’d barely been able to scrape through this fight, and the reason she’d managed to avoid having a mental breakdown had undoubtedly been because of the gift given to her by the boy she’d been so captivated by recently. Unconsciously, with no ulterior motive at all, Shizuku kissed her katana’s hilt. She was, of course, only showing her gratitude to her faithful partner. She absolutely was not using the katana as a substitute for a certain someone. Absolutely not! But no matter what excuses she made in her head, Shizuku couldn’t deceive herself. In the end, she took her lips off the hilt and blushed faintly.

In order to reset her feelings, she slapped her cheeks and started walking briskly down the tunnel. Praying that her best friend, who was running toward her, wouldn’t notice how red her face was.

Supported by Kaori’s shoulder, Shizuku arrived safely at the gate. She

immediately furrowed her brows and bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, Shea. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“I told you, it’s fine. You don’t have to worry about it. You didn’t hold back on my account, did you? Because if you did, then I’ll actually be mad. You only attacked me three times, you know.”

Shea walked over to help support Shizuku as well, and she felt both apologetic and happy that Shea cared so much about her. Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes, and she whispered softly, “Sorry.”

Shea patted Shizuku gently on the head with her bunny ears. Shizuku sat down against the wall of ice and Kaori started casting healing magic on her. The pain of her cuts and bruises vanished instantly, washed away by the warmth of Kaori’s magic. For a few minutes, Shizuku leaned against Kaori, resting, but then she straightened her back and opened her eyes.

“Thanks, Kaori. I’m fine now.”

Kaori breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Shizuku’s smile.

“Thank goodness. You were hurt so bad I was worried you’d end up like you did that one time.”

The “one time” Kaori was referring to was when they’d been cornered in the Great Orcus Labyrinth and had been saved by Hajime. In order to protect her comrades, Shizuku had charged in alone and nearly lost her life as a result. Afterward, the two of them had huddled together as they’d faced what should have been certain death.

“Come on, I didn’t look that bad this time. My arm wasn’t even crushed. Small flesh wounds like those are nothing.”

Seeing the tears in Kaori’s eyes, Shizuku did her best to sound as cheerful as possible. Though there likely weren’t many high school girls who’d say something like “It’s not a real injury until you’ve lost an arm!” In fact, there weren’t any high school guys who would either.

“Oh, Shizuku-chan...” Kaori made a weird face, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

This was actually one of Shizuku's bad habits. Even when they'd been back on Earth, Shizuku had never complained when she got hurt during kendo training. She'd get hit so hard she'd start tearing up, but even then she'd grin and bear it. Her endurance stemmed from her kindness; Shizuku didn't want others worrying about her. She'd gotten even more taciturn about talking about her own problems after they'd been summoned to Tortus, and that was really worrying Kaori. She really wanted Shizuku to grumble more, or at least rely on someone else. But the more she tried to get Shizuku to stop holding everything in, the more Shizuku smiled and pretended nothing was wrong.

Shizuku's smile truly was dazzling. It was so reassuring one couldn't help but think she really was fine. But Kaori knew she was just pushing the hurt deep inside. No matter how much Kaori healed Shizuku's physical injuries, she couldn't heal the pain Shizuku was bottling up. Kaori knew she had to do more. This just wasn't enough.

"Shizuku-chan. You have to learn to be more selfish."

"Huh?"

"I'd be really happy if you asked me for something selfish right now. I just want you to know that."

Kaori gently hugged Shizuku, and suddenly Shizuku was at a loss for words. Kaori was glowing faintly as she hugged Shizuku. She was using spirit magic to try and heal Shizuku's soul. It was her way of silently emphasizing that she wanted to be there to heal Shizuku.

Still at a loss for words, Shizuku nearly started bawling then and there. But she held it in, and instead hugged Kaori back.

A short distance away, Hajime watched the two girls. It was hard to tell if he was happy for them, or just found their antics entertaining. Sharp as always, Shizuku noticed his gaze right away and shot him a withering glare. Though she was blushing slightly so it wasn't all that intimidating.

"What? Is there something you want to say?"

"Nah, not really. Just thinking the two of you really are good friends."

Hajime's shoulders trembled as he struggled to hold in a laugh. Shizuku's

reactions really were hilarious. Tio, Shea, and Yue all smiled at Shizuku as well and added their own comments.

“Mhmm. Such beautiful friendship.”

“I know, right? Watching them is enough to soothe me.”

“They’re like lovers...”

At Yue’s words, Kaori suddenly looked up. Yue’s smile turned into a teasing grin.

As always, Kaori hotly protested, “Yue, stop saying things like that!”

“Don’t worry Kaori... I don’t judge. Girls should be free to love girls. I hope you two are happy.”

“That’s not the problem here! Don’t make this weird!”

Kaori hadn’t realized it yet, but it was because she was so easily flustered that Yue enjoyed tormenting her so much. Yue’s sadistic side only came out around Kaori. Despite all her complaining though, Kaori made no move to push Shizuku away. While the two might not actually have been in love with each other, it was easy to see how one might think they were. Within seconds, Kaori and Yue were back to their usual catfighting though. Caught in the middle, Shizuku struggled futilely to calm them both down.

“Hey, Nagumo-kun. Stop laughing and help me out here.”

“Just leave them be. It’s not like we have anything else to do until Amanogawa and the others finish. If you really want them to stop, why not say something like, ‘Please, don’t fight over me, you two!’?”

“What kind of woman do you take me for?”

Shizuku glared at Hajime, but he just snickered in response. Her glare grew stronger, and Hajime’s expression grew serious. He cleared his throat and said, “Anyway, I think you should loosen up a little, Yaegashi.”

“Come again?”

“You take everything too seriously. Those whispers are messing with your head, right? Instead of wallowing in your own misery, why not have some fun to

refresh yourself? At least here, there's no one you have to babysit."

"....."

Shizuku's eyes widened in surprise. She couldn't explain why, but something about what Hajime had said had resonated with her. He'd had the opposite effect of the whispers. Hajime didn't seem to register Shizuku's surprise and he added with a mischievous grin, "If you want, I can lend you Shea's bunny ears. You love cute things, don't you, Shizuku-chan?"

"Sh-Shut up! I'm perfectly fine! And stop grinning like that!"

Shizuku's face was beet-red. It was hard to tell if she was mad about being teased, or embarrassed that Hajime had used her first name, though. Hajime guffawed as he watched Shizuku's reaction.

"Jeez, give it a rest already..."

Realizing nothing she said would get him to stop, Shizuku pouted and looked away. Suddenly, she realized people were staring at her from both sides. While she'd been talking to Hajime, Yue and Kaori had finished arguing. Kaori gave her a suggestive look, grinning.

"Wh-What is it?"

Kaori teasingly poked Shizuku's cheek and said, "Fufu. You look like you're having a lot of fun, Shizuku-chan."

Yue also saw right through Shizuku and glared flatly at her.

"Mmm... So you enjoy being teased by Hajime."

Shizuku blushed even brighter after Yue pointed that out.

"What!? No I don't! I'm not happy at all! Stop teasing meow!"

"Meow?"

"Are you a cat?"

Shizuku buried her face in her hands as Kaori and Yue teased her in perfect sync. *I just want to crawl in a hole and die somewhere.*

Yue folded her arms and mumbled to herself, "Are we about to get another..."

She didn't specify what exactly they were getting another of. Kaori didn't ask either. She just smiled and said, "Who knows!"

Shizuku curled up in a corner and covered her face with her ponytail, activating her ponytail guard. Kaori smiled benevolently down at her, looking like a saint.

Just then, a flash of white light shot toward the group, interrupting their antics. It parted the mist of snow, a beam of pure white mana headed straight for Hajime. Shizuku looked up in surprise, but she barely had time to even gasp before it reached its target.

"Nagumo-kun, watch out! That's Divine Wrath!"

"Calm down, I've got it."

Hajime took out his Gate Key and twisted it into the empty space in front of him. It opened a portal connecting to the Gate Hall he'd set up next to him. The destructive torrent of light vanished through the portal and headed out of the corresponding one, firing off in some random direction. In some ways, these dimensional portals were Hajime's strongest defensive artifact. Since he knew Kouki and Ryutarou's attacks would always be directed at him, he'd thought it would be more efficient to just redirect them rather than block each one. And it turned out he was right. The reason no attacks had come his way until now was likely because Kouki and Ryutarou stuck to close-combat techniques to avoid friendly fire.

"Kouki's..."

A pillar of white light shot up in the distance. Kouki had just activated his Limit Break. Shizuku looked worriedly at the fog of snow. She hadn't expected the Frost Golem to give Kouki so much trouble that he'd be forced to use one of his trump cards. The mist Kouki's Divine Wrath had blown away reconvened, covering the room in icy fog once more.

"Amanogawa's starting to panic."

Hajime's assessment was right on the money. Having voluntarily sealed his favorite move, Celestial Flash, Kouki's options in combat were limited. After driving himself into a corner, he'd felt the only way out was to use a

combination of Limit Break and Divine Wrath. Chances were he was in quite a bind now that his strongest attack had gone in the wrong direction.

“Well, now that he’s used Limit Break, he should make it in another few minutes. The real problem is whether the other two will be able to.”

“Huh? Are you sure Kouki’s fine?”

Shizuku was surprised by how casually Hajime had moved on from Kouki’s fight. She kept shooting worried glances in the direction Divine Wrath had come from, and it looked like she was about to run off to help him.

Sighing at her overprotectiveness, Hajime said, “He still has the Limit Break’s derivative skill left, doesn’t he? As long as he hasn’t used that yet, it means he’s doing fine. Besides, the condition for clearing this part of the labyrinth is defeating the golem assigned to you. The last thing Amanogawa wants is help.”

“I... suppose you’re right.”

“You know, I said this earlier too, but you’re way too obsessed with taking care of people. There’s a reason everyone calls you mom.”

“Excuse me!? You’re the only one who calls me that, Nagumo-kun! How rude!”

Hajime ignored Shizuku’s petulant outburst and pulled his compass out of his pocket. Right now, he was seeking “Taniguchi Suzu’s location.”

“Over there, huh?”

“Hajime-kun. How are Ryutarou-kun and Suzu-chan...”

“Hold on, I’m checking that right now. I get the feeling Taniguchi’s probably the one struggling the most right now, since she’s defense-oriented...”

Hajime sent one of his Cross Bits in the direction the compass pointed. He also pulled out a crystal ball that relayed the images the Cross Bit saw so that Kaori and the others could watch too. For a while, all they saw was gray ice crystals, but then finally the group could make out two faintly glowing objects in the distance. Hajime maneuvered his Cross Bit to a spot that gave a good view of the battlefield.

The glowing objects turned out to be Suzu’s Hallowed Grounds. One was cast

on Suzu herself. She was using it to protect herself from the laser beams that occasionally came for her. The other she'd cast on the Frost Golem. She'd sealed its movements using a barrier. But that wasn't all she'd done. Water dripped from the Frost Golem's body, and it had shrunk to a fraction of its original size.

—Twin Fan Technique - Blazing Hallowed Ground. This was a fire magic and barrier magic fusion spell that created a superheated zone inside the barrier. The Frost Golem knew it was in danger of melting completely and continued slamming its halberd over and over into Suzu's barrier. Each swing managed to do a decent amount of damage to the Hallowed Ground. But every time it looked like it was about to break, Suzu would cast another one on top of it, keeping the golem trapped.

Hajime assumed Hallowed Ground - Burst hadn't had enough firepower to punch through the Frost Golems. So Suzu had thought of a different way to beat it, and had come up with this. In a confined space like a barrier, Suzu was able to overcome the natural properties of the Frost Caverns and utilize fire magic effectively. As a result, she could take advantage of the Frost Golem's natural weakness. Since she didn't have the offensive power to destroy it in one hit, she'd decided to whittle it down instead. Suzu truly had a good grasp on her new abilities and what they were capable of. That being said, victory wasn't still wasn't coming easy.

"Ugh... Haaah... Haaah... Almost there... Just a little more..."

Her breathing was labored, her eyes were glazed over, and sweat poured down her face in waves. Keeping two of the strongest barriers active at once was mentally and physically draining to the extreme. Her hands trembled as they struggled to hold her fans up, and it was obvious it was taking all of her concentration not to drop them. Suzu was clearly nearing her limits. It was a battle of endurance now. Would Suzu's concentration last longer than the Frost Golem's endurance?

"I won't lose. Haaah... Haaah... I'll never lose! No matter what happens, no matter what anyone tells me! I'm going to get through this and talk to Eri again!"

Naturally, the labyrinth's whispers hadn't stopped. And so, Suzu shouted to herself to keep her spirits up. A fiery will lit up within her empty eyes, and she brushed a drop of sweat out of her eyes. Screaming, she pushed down on the Frost Golem even harder.

"Suzu-chan..."

"An impressive performance."

Tio was amazed by Suzu's perseverance.

"Looks like she'll be just fine."

"Yeah..."

Suzu's determination was so dazzling that Shizuku was momentarily stunned. So much so that agreeing with Hajime was all she could do. She felt embarrassed for having underestimated the extent of Suzu's determination earlier. Worrying about Suzu now would just be rude to her. At the very least, Suzu was past a point where Shizuku needed to take care of her. Like the barriers she created, Suzu was firm and unyielding.

Maybe Nagumo-kun's right. I really shouldn't be so overprotective. Shizuku smiled bitterly to herself. But a moment later, her thoughts reversed direction. Because the next person Hajime's Cross Bit went to was a muscle-headed moron who needed to be babysat.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Namely, Ryutarou. For some unfathomable reason, he'd gotten into a slugfest with his Frost Golem. The same Frost Golem that was four times his size.

"Oooh, he's really good at hand-to-hand combat!"

The only one impressed was Shea. Everyone else was nonplussed.

Why are neither of them using any footwork?

Why did the Frost Golem give up its halberd and actually accept Ryutarou's boxing challenge?

Why are neither of them guarding?

Why are they taking turns smacking each other like there's some kind of rule about each fighter only getting one punch at a time?

"Well, he is an idiot."

"I-I can't argue there."

"Ryutarou-kun..."

They looked like a pair of delinquents duking it out by the riverside. Hajime was half-worried Ryutarou and the Frost Golem might actually make up at the end of the fight and become friends.

Kaori cradled her head in her hands while Shizuku just grimaced as she watched her childhood friend fight.

"I must say, it's impressive he hasn't been hit by a stray laser yet."

Tio cocked her head quizzically. Indeed, despite the fact that both combatants were stationary, Ryutarou had yet to take a fatal blow from a laser. Occasionally one would graze past him, or shoot through his extremities of course. He was in fact covered in small wounds, but surprisingly not a single one had hit his head or heart or other vitals yet.

Hajime's guess was that because Ryutarou had wrapped himself in mana and was continually using Diamond Skin, he was keeping his defense high enough to instinctively avoid a fatal blow. Of course, Ryutarou himself had just given up on evasion completely because he'd deemed that defeating the Frost Golem while also dodging lasers was impossible. His thought process was exceedingly simple: If he could defeat his enemy before he got hurt too bad, it was his win.

"The Frost Golem looks like it's at its limit, so as long as Sakagami's fighting spirit's going strong he'll probably win... Anyway, he's your childhood friend, Kaori. You heal him."

"There's no healing magic that heals just wounds and leaves the pain, is there?"

Kaori's smile didn't reach her eyes. She was seriously considering doing it. There was no doubt in Hajime's mind that while Kaori might heal Ryutarou's physical scars, she'd be giving him some new mental ones.

A few minutes later, Kouki defeated his Frost Golem. Of the remaining three, he was the first. However, using Limit Break had drained him completely, and he used his Holy Sword as a crutch as he limped down the tunnel to the rest of the party.

Next to finish was Suzu. Like Kouki, she was exhausted and could barely walk straight. Since she looked ready to collapse at any moment Shizuku ran over and half-carried her back.

Ryutarou was the last to finish. And finished he was. He'd lost so much blood it was a miracle he was even alive. Yet he smiled in satisfaction as he slumped to the ground, unconscious. He hadn't even made it into the tunnel, so lasers were still bouncing all around him.

"Wawah, Ryutarou-kun!"

Panicking, Kaori ran over to him. One of the lasers snaked across the ground and headed straight for Ryutarou's neck. If someone didn't move him, he'd be beheaded. Sighing, Hajime coated his Cross Bit in Diamond Skin and had it block for Ryutarou. In doing so, he got an up-close look at Ryutarou's satisfied smile and suddenly felt like killing the guy himself.

"Maybe I should hit him with a shotgun blast."

"You too, Nagumo-kun!?"

Hajime leveled his gun at Ryutarou. Shizuku opened her mouth to argue, but then Kaori reached Ryutarou and Hajime reluctantly put his gun away. Kaori grabbed Ryutarou by the legs and dragged him into the safety of the tunnel. She had cast healing magic on him, but at the same time she was dragging him across every bump and rough patch on the icy floor, so she obviously wasn't too pleased with him either.

"Mmm? Hajime, the sun's gone."

"Oh? I guess that means the trial's over?"

Hajime looked up where Yue was pointing and saw that the sun was indeed gone. The lasers vanished as soon as Ryutarou entered the tunnel as well, and the shards of ice melted away. The mist was sucked away as well, as though a ventilation fan had suddenly appeared on the ceiling.

A moment later, the gate behind Hajime started glowing brilliantly. Unexpectedly though, instead of opening, the gate itself transformed into a portal of light.

“I guess this light portal’s our exit.”

“It reminds me of the teleportation portals... Is it going to warp us somewhere?”

“That doesn’t sound very good.”

“Shea. Has anything good ever happened in a labyrinth?”

“Ahaha, I guess not. Those whispers were the worst thing ever though, so I wish they’d stop... but they probably won’t, huh? Haaah...”

Shea’s bunny ears drooped despondently. No physical enemy could stand up to Shea’s insane strength, but psychological warfare like this was unbelievably irksome to deal with. Shea couldn’t help but be annoyed.

“Kouki-kun, Suzu-chan, come over here! I’ll heal you all at once!”

By the time Kaori had finished dragging Ryutarou back, Kouki and Suzu had made it through their tunnels as well. They were so exhausted they didn’t even react to Kaori’s summons. Eventually, Kouki started crawling slowly over to where Kaori was. The way he moved looked a little creepy. Suzu wasn’t even willing to put in that much effort, and she rolled slowly across the ground to Kaori.

“Nagumo... Sorry... I attacked you,” Kouki apologized, his expression dark. Considering his exhaustion his emotional state was understandable, but Hajime thought he’d at least be a little happy to have cleared his trial. His voice was so devoid of enthusiasm that it was uncanny. It felt as though the emotions had been drained from him.

“I told you not to worry about me. If you were gonna shoot it off in the end anyway, you may as well have done it from the start.”

“You’re right... I sent my Divine Wrath at you, and you don’t look hurt at all. Nothing I do could possibly hurt you. So I...”

Kouki turned to face Hajime. His eyes were sunken, his pupils surrounded in

darkness. But with an enormous effort, he managed to smile stiffly. However, that smile was dangerous. Of course he was frustrated by the enormous gap between him and Hajime, but that wasn't all. There was something more to that smile.

"Kouki, are you alright? You're acting strange. Are the side effects of activating Limit Break that harsh? Do you want to lie down for a bit?"

"....."

Feeling as though she was missing something important, Shizuku shot Kouki a worried look. She patted her knees as if to say he was welcome to rest in her lap if he wanted. But for some reason, when Kouki turned to Shizuku he looked almost afraid. Only for a second though, after which he averted his gaze. *Was it just my imagination? There's no reason Kouki should be scared of me.*

"No, I'm fine, Shizuku."

"A-Are you sure?"

Kouki closed his eyes and shook his head, rejecting Shizuku completely. He sat cross-legged on the floor and went still. It seemed as though he'd turned to ice, both in body and in spirit. At a loss for words, Shizuku looked around the room. *I'm sure he's just focusing on recovering his strength...* Shizuku kept telling herself that and reluctantly walked away.

Hajime shot Kouki a quick glance. He hadn't missed Kouki's earlier expression. In fact, he was the only one who'd noticed the frozen hatred that had been swirling around inside him.

"Man, what an annoying theme for a labyrinth."

He smiled bitterly to himself. Yue shot him a questioning glance, but he just shook his head. Kouki was dealing with some inner conflict only he could resolve, and it involved Hajime. Telling Yue and the others wouldn't help things.

A short while later, Kaori finished healing all of her friends.

"Which do you prefer? Staying here to rest, or pushing onward?"

"Pushing onward."

Hajime asked the others to vote on which they wanted, and Kouki replied

immediately. His tone was adamant, but his gaze seemed to be focused on something other than Hajime. Shrugging, Hajime turned to the others. No one else wanted to stay even a second longer in this maze of whispers, so they didn't object.

“Alright then, let's keep going.”

With that, the party stepped through the portal of light.

Chapter IV: True Heart

As the blinding light began to fade, Hajime realized he was alone.

“So we got separated, huh? Well, I figured we would.”

Of course, predicting this outcome didn't make Hajime any happier about it. Furrowing his brows, he examined his surroundings.

“Looks like it's a straight path.”

The corridor in front of him was two meters wide, two meters tall, and made entirely of the same reflective ice the maze had been. There was nowhere to retreat. The gate he'd arrived through faded away, turning into a normal ice wall. Upon turning around, all Hajime saw was himself. He returned his gaze forward and started walking down the narrow corridor. It was clearly meant for only one person to pass through.

All around him, reflections of himself walked in cadence with his gait. His footfalls echoed loudly through the corridor. Naturally, Hajime was a master of moving silently, but he saw no point in doing so at the moment. Each of his steps felt as though they were causing ripples in the ice. Not regular ripples of sound, either. No, odd as it seemed, Hajime felt as though those ripples were the sound of his heart. Each step seemed to be urging him to doubt himself, to question whether he really belonged anywhere.

It felt as though his heart was beating loudly and softly at the same time. He accepted this strange new sensation and continued walking. The corridor didn't turn or fork at all, and after a few minutes, Hajime found himself standing in front of a massive pillar of ice. It stood in the center of a large open room, connecting the heavens and earth. Its upper and lower sections were wider than the rest, making it look like a tree of ice had taken root. There were even little branches and leaves splitting off from the upper end.

“This is still the only path, huh?”

Muttering to himself, Hajime strode over to the giant ice tree. Like everything

else in the labyrinth, the ice tree was perfectly reflective. Because of how wide it was, it reflected Hajime perfectly, without any warping or distortion. As he drew closer the reflection grew more and more vivid. It was as if another Hajime lived inside the polished mirror of ice.

Once he was close enough to touch the tree, Hajime stopped and stared at his reflection. It had white hair, wore an eyepatch, and a long black coat, and had an artificial arm. Hajime's appearance was about as edgy as it got. Seeing his fashion choices thrust in front of him like this brought Hajime to his knees.

"Shit... Now that I'm seeing it again, I realize how cringy this outfit is. How could I pick this..."

In truth, Hajime rarely ever examined himself in a mirror. Fixing his bed head was one of Yue's favorite pastimes, so he had little reason to. And until now, he'd been focused on the enemies in front of him, so he hadn't paid much attention to his reflection. It was only now that he was alone, with no enemies nearby, that he had time to stop and properly examine his appearance. And what he saw brought back buried memories of his dark past. It was little wonder he was so shocked.

But dyeing his hair was time he didn't want to spend, and without his eyepatch, his Demon Eye glowed this eerie pale blue, so he had no choice but to wear it. As for his coat, Yue had sewn it for him herself, so naturally, he loved it. He needed his prosthetic arm too, since he'd lost his real one. At least, these were the excuses he told himself to justify his fashion sense. In a way, among all the things he'd faced in the labyrinth, it was this that had hurt him the most.

Had Kouki and the others seen him like this, kneeling on all fours, their jaws would have dropped open. That was how rare it was to see Hajime shaken.

"You know what, maybe the voice is right. Maybe I don't have a place to return to in Japan."

At least not looking like this. If he walked around Tokyo dressed like this, he'd definitely draw the wrong kind of attention. Though it was likely that wasn't what the whispers were trying to insinuate. Hajime seemed to have misunderstood their intent. In order to correct him, the same voice he'd grown used to hearing these past few hours spoke up.

“That’s not what I meant, fool.”

“You finally showed up, huh?”

Hajime narrowed his eyes and looked up. His reflection glared down at him. Though the real Hajime was on all fours, his reflection was still standing inside the ice tree.

“I should have known that wouldn’t spook you. Or should I say, spook me?”

“Of course not. I’ve already figured out what the theme of this labyrinth is. That, plus what Amanogawa said earlier gave me all the clues I needed to figure out this was what was coming next.”

Though he was talking to his own reflection, Hajime was unfazed. The Hajime in the mirror grinned and asked, “And what theme would that be?”

“You’re me, aren’t you? You shouldn’t even need to ask.”

“Oh no. I might be you, but I’m not all of you. But you figured that out too, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” Hajime said with a nod.

The Hajime within the mirror was a fictional Hajime. He’d already experienced something similar in the Haltina Woods. Of course, back there it had been monsters pretending to be Yue and the others, but he already knew labyrinths read the data of those who challenged them and were capable of creating copies.

The fake’s earlier assertion that he wasn’t all of Hajime just supported his hypothesis. Namely that the fake was another one of the labyrinth’s trials. Meaning that even if he was speaking with a carbon copy of himself, Hajime still needed to answer to advance further. Hajime got to his feet and said in annoyance, “The theme of this labyrinth is ‘conquering oneself.’ It’s a test to see whether you can overcome a version of yourself made of all the parts of yourself that you hate, of all the dark emotions you try to repress, of all the things you try to tell yourself aren’t true... Am I right?”

Hajime glanced upward. The ceiling spread out above him, but he was looking far past that, to the world that existed beyond these caverns.

“It doesn’t matter how strong you are physically if your heart’s weak. This is a trial to make sure the gods won’t find a way to manipulate you.”

“Nice going, me. One hundred points.”

Hajime’s reflection clapped in an exaggerated manner.

“God, you piss me off,” Hajime muttered. But of course, he’d just admitted that his reflection was a part of his own personality, so he was effectively saying his own arrogance pissed him off.

A moment later, though, Hajime’s reflection suddenly transformed. It stopped clapping, and its eyes started glowing red while its hair turned black. Its black coat and artificial arm, on the other hand, turned white. Its skin also darkened, resembling the swarthy pigmentation of demons.

Its colors were the exact opposite of Hajime’s. Wary of the sudden change, Hajime took a few steps back. A second later, there were two loud bangs. Both Hajime and his reflection had fired at each other. They’d moved so fast that it had been impossible to tell when they’d drawn their revolvers, or where they were about to aim.

Hajime’s black Donner shot out a crimson bullet at his reflection. Meanwhile, the reflection’s white Donner shot out a dark black bullet at Hajime. Surrounded in pitch black sparks, the bullet streaked through the ice and headed straight for Hajime’s forehead. But obviously, Hajime’s bullet had been fired with pinpoint accuracy too, and it met his reflection’s in midair. The two collided and shattered. Such an unbelievable clash was only possible because the reflection had inherited Hajime’s movements and spirit.

While Hajime may have taken a step backward, and thus retreated, he’d still been trying to kill his opponent as he ran. He hadn’t hesitated at all. These movements had been ingrained into him on a subconscious level, and he naturally radiated a silent aura of bloodlust when faced with an enemy.

“Haha, I should have known I’d predict that shot. After all, I know best what timing to fire, what thoughts go through my head when I’m fighting, and how I prefer to slaughter my enemies.”

Hajime’s reflection flashed him an irritating grin and stepped outside of the

ice tree. The tree's bark rippled as the reflection entered the real world and turned into a proper fake instead of just a reflection.

It drew a white Schlag with its white prosthetic arm and took a stance with both revolvers. Its right foot was held slightly back, and its center of gravity was low. In its right hand was Donner, held close to its chest. In its left was Schlag, held perpendicular to its body with its artificial elbow thrust forward. Donner and the shotgun loaded inside its elbow were aimed forward, while Schlag was held in reserve to cover its rear.

It was the very same Gun Kata style that Hajime had developed.

Wordlessly, Hajime took the same stance.



The two Hajime's clashed in reality for the first time. The air in the room shook violently as they fought each other. The bloodlust radiating from each of them was strong enough to exert a physical force.

As Hajime had expected, the labyrinth had done a stellar job of copying him. He had no idea what magic was at work here, but his copy was every bit as skilled as he was. Everything from his aura to his artifacts had been recreated perfectly.

In this surreal situation, Hajime's copy smiled derisively and said, "Now then, Hajime Nagumo. Can you defeat yourself?"

A tremendous roar split the air. Both of them had leaped forward, summoned two Cross Bits to give supporting fire, and feinted shooting their revolvers while actually pivoting into a roundhouse kick against each other.

The reason Hajime had opted for a roundhouse kick was because doing so would simultaneously let him dodge the fake's Cross Bit barrage. Thanks to his Riftwalk-enhanced perception, Hajime was able to see the copy's bombardment pass by him in slow motion. But of course, his opponent had done the exact same thing, for the exact same reason. Neither of them hit each other.

Their feet clashed, and they were both blown backward. In response, they both transmuted spikes out of the soles of their shoes to anchor them in place. Hajime instantly went back on the offensive. By using the spikes as a pivot, he was able to convert the force used to knock him back to rotational energy and he turned around and brandished Donner.

There was a loud clang of metal hitting metal. Hajime's copy had done the same thing, but rotated in the opposite direction. The two gun barrels clashed against each other.

It was like Hajime was fighting a mirror. Even their exclamations were the same.

"Die."

"Die."

Both parties fired without hesitation, and another loud bang echoed through

the room. At the same time, both Donner's were blown backward. Like before, a pair of crushed bullets fell to the ground with a clink.

Neither of them registered the sound though; they'd both aimed Schlags at each other under their armpits. Again, they fired simultaneously. Their bullets clashed in the space perfectly in between them, and the shockwaves rattled the nearby atmosphere.

Both Hajime and the copy utilized the shockwaves to rotate their bodies yet again and fire off another roundhouse kick. The sound of their legs colliding was so loud it was hard to imagine it was two flesh and blood appendages that had just hit each other. The moment they clashed they both backed off and launched lower-angled kicks.

Again, the sound of two impossibly hard objects colliding reverberated through the room. This time though, the copy grinned. As if signaling the warm-up was over. And in truth, the time for the mirror matchup was over.

Hajime pointed Donner at the copy's head and pulled the trigger. But the copy knocked Donner aside with its own Schlag, fouling Hajime's aim. Hajime's bullet only grazed the copy's temple, and this time it was the copy who aimed Donner at Hajime's head and fired. But Hajime had been expecting that, and he tilted his head sideways to avoid the shot. Without even bothering to look at the black streak that passed inches from his face, he aimed Schlag at the copy's foot.

Dodging backward, the copy kicked Hajime's Schlag away, then fired Donner at his heart. But Hajime thrust out his artificial arm and deflected the black streak of death. At such close distance, it seemed as though the two were fighting using martial arts, not guns.

They continued dodging or deflecting each other's shots by a paper-thin margin. Both sides were accelerating their movements, trying to find an opening to rain death onto each other, but their black and crimson streaks were unable to reach their respective targets. They both used Cross Bits to try and hit each other's blind spots, but as expected they continued to miss or clash against each other.

After a few minutes of fierce fighting, the copy finally opened its mouth.

“Damn, you’re tough. Really tough. That’s not the kind of strength a human can have. Am I right?”

“Huh?”

Hajime and the copy both cast Gale Claw onto their Donners and sliced each other’s cheeks. Drops of blood danced through the air, and the copy grinned.

“Monstrous strength, hands drenched in blood, a heart that feels nothing when killing others... What would our family think if they saw us now?”

“What’re you trying to say?”

Hajime and his copy quickly reloaded their revolvers. In the half-second it took him to spin his barrel and fill it with bullets, Hajime tried to get his copy off-balance by transmuting the ground underneath it. But the copy had been expecting that, and Hajime’s crimson sparks were met by the copy’s black ones.

“We want to go home. That’s our greatest desire, but... will that place really be home for us still?”

“.....”

“Earth, and Japan especially, don’t look kindly on murderers. Who would ever accept a monster like us? Mom? Dad? What would they think if they found out their son had turned into a murderer and a monster while he was missing? They’d probably be horrified, wouldn’t they? Start wondering if we really even are their son.”

Since bullets weren’t working, the copy had decided to use words instead. But those words were more malicious and destructive than any bullet might be.

Hajime had no way of deflecting them and was forced to silently take them. Despite his internal conflict though, he continued moving with the same mechanical efficiency. He pulled a large number of hand grenades out of his Treasure Trove and primed them all with Lightning Field.

He dumped the payload at his feet, and the copy smiled. Hajime wreathed himself in crimson sparks. The copy wreathed itself in black sparks. Both had activated Diamond Skin simultaneously.

A second later, an explosion so massive it tore apart the very air rocked the

room. Dazzling pillars of fire lit up the cavern, and there was a massive crater where Hajime had dropped the grenades. With a loud whoosh, two figures shot through the flames in opposite directions. They both shouldered Orkans as they slid across the ground, and fired all twelve rockets.

The area in between them turned into a sea of heat and flame. The explosions caused by the missiles colliding created massive shockwaves. Cracks ran through the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling. Because missiles weren't as precise as bullets, some of them slipped past each other. But of course, Hajime and his copy shot those down with pinpoint revolver shots.

A second later, the copy called out as if nothing had happened, "You're scared, aren't you? Scared that the home you want so badly to return to vanished long ago! Scared that your family might reject you! Admit it!"

"You sure talk a lot."

The copy spread its arms wide, one hand holding Orkan, the other Donner. He looked like an actor playing out the role of a villain. It was clear from the glee in his voice that he was enjoying revealing the fears Hajime had locked away in his heart. The copy's voice grew even sharper and its words more caustic. Frowning, Hajime withdrew his chakrams from the Treasure Trove and launched them toward the copy.

"That's why you couldn't ignore Aiko Hatayama's words. When she told you the way you live your life wouldn't work back on Earth, you were shaken! The reason you respect her so much is because she at least tried to give you an answer to the dilemma you couldn't solve on your own. I'm right, aren't I!?"

"....." Hajime's silence was proof he agreed. Sneering, the copy pulled out its own chakrams and let them loose. Though it looked like he'd thrown them haphazardly, the copy's chakrams countered all of Hajime's.

Hajime shot a bullet through the portal of one of the chakrams he'd kept close by. He was able to keep his aim perfect, even when he had to deal with jumps in space. His bullet popped out of one of the far portals and headed straight for the copy's heart. But as expected, the copy wasn't alarmed. As always, it had fired its own bullet through one of its portals to neutralize Hajime's.

Everything Hajime did was countered perfectly. The copy continued its verbal barrage, completely unfazed by Hajime's attacks.

"But you know, even if you've stopped living a lonely life, that doesn't change the fact that you're a monster whose hands are stained with blood. Your world, your family, they won't accept you!"

"....."

"You told everyone you didn't feel anything the first time you killed a person. But we both know that's a lie! Even if you didn't feel guilty, you definitely were afraid! Maybe you didn't realize it at the time, but you were afraid that you were no longer the Hajime Nagumo your parents knew!"

Hajime furrowed his brows, and his reaction time slipped by a fraction of a second. In that instant, another black streak shot through the copy's chakram and grazed Hajime's shoulder. It was a small cut, barely worth paying attention to. But it was the first time since the battle had started that only Hajime had come out of a clash wounded.

Seeing Hajime's hesitation, the copy continued firing off more barbed words. It planned to riddle Hajime's heart with holes using these invisible bullets it knew were effective.

"Thank god Yue was there for you, huh? As long as you've got her, you can continue clinging to her even if the rest of the world rejects you."

Ignoring the wound on his shoulder, Hajime glared coldly at his copy. Was his expressionless, ice-cold gaze his way of showing his anger? Or was it a mask to hide the fact that his ironclad resolve was finally crumbling? At least to the copy, it seemed to be the latter.

It prepared its next words, intent on destroying the largest pillar supporting Hajime's mental state, Yue. As the pair resumed their close-combat struggle it said, "You say you love Yue, but do you really mean that from the bottom of your heart? No, you don't."

Disdain dripped from the copy's voice. It continued pounding invisible bullets into Hajime's heart.

"You're just clinging to her."

Fresh blood flew through the air. The copy's bullet had grazed Hajime's neck this time. Had the wound been even a few millimeters deeper, it would have been fatal. Hajime had survived by the skin of his teeth, but even then his expression didn't change. However, his focus was clearly lacking. His movements were sluggish, lacking their usual sharpness. He was beginning to just barely lag behind his copy.

The copy sneered, thoroughly disappointed in Hajime.

"She only exists to protect our fragile little heart. Those feelings we've deluded ourselves into thinking are love are mostly just relief. We cling to her because she makes us feel safe, that's all."

Hajime swung Donner at his copy, but it knocked the gun upward. It then thrust Schlag into Hajime's unguarded chest.

Having destroyed the two pillars that supported Hajime's iron will, his love for Yue and his desire to return home, the copy was ready to deliver the final blow. If Hajime couldn't even overcome himself, then he deserved to be buried here in this labyrinth of malice.

There was a click as the trigger was pulled. But it was Hajime who'd pulled it, not the copy.

"Ah!?"

A red streak shot forward like a meteorite. It pierced through the copy's artificial arm, forcing it to drop Schlag. When Donner had been knocked upward Hajime had used his pinky finger as a fulcrum and flicked his wrist to flip it around and point it back down at the copy.

The copy hadn't expected such a maneuver, and it could only gaze blankly at its own damaged arm. Naturally, Hajime had no intention of giving his copy time to recover.

He recovered his stance almost instantly, making it obvious that he'd made himself appear vulnerable earlier on purpose. Then, he kicked off the ground with such force that he left a small crater where his foot had been. He launched a decisive elbow into his copy's stomach, knocking the air out of its lungs. And that wasn't all.

“Gah!?”

An explosive slug shot out of his elbow, blowing the copy away. As it slammed into the ice tree behind it, it coughed up a lungful of blood. Hajime tapped his shoulder with Donner and walked slowly over to his copy. For the first time this fight, his face was showing emotion. His eyes were narrow slits, and displeasure radiated from every pore in his body.

“I get this is part of the trial and all, but... you talk way too much during a fight. If you’ve got time to spout crap, then you should spend that time thinking of ways to kill your enemy faster. For someone who’s supposed to be my copy, you sure don’t act like me.”

What had really angered Hajime was that his own fighting style had so many flaws in it. Confused, the copy unsteadily got to its feet. Its legs were wobbling, and it was clearly hurt. While it had managed to lessen the impact of Hajime’s elbow with Diamond Skin, its internal organs had still taken significant damage. Worse, its artificial arm had lost part of its functionality.

“My words come from your own heart. They’re not lies. These are things you yourself should be fearing. So how come you don’t look bothered by them at all!? You should be a broken mess right now!”

“Well, yeah, it hurts to hear. Having all my biggest fears and the darkest parts of me laid bare like this feels as bad as if someone had read aloud a chronicle of my chuuni years to a live audience.”

Hajime smiled faintly, and his copy grew even more confused.

“Then how can you smile like that!?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I knew all that without you having to tell me.”

He paused there for a second, confirming his own feelings. Then quietly continued, “You’re right that somewhere in the bottom of my heart, I’m terrified of going back home. It’s also true that while Sensei’s words saved me, they weren’t enough to erase that fear. And I know I’ve thought once or twice that... even if Japan rejects me, I’ll always have Yue.”

“Then why aren’t you shaken!? Humans can’t bear to look at their own ugliness. That’s the kind of creature they are! The more they’re forced to

confront their own disgusting nature, the more they try to plug their ears, close their eyes, and pretend it doesn't exist! And if they're forced to face them even after trying to run from them, they break! That's just what humans are!"

Hearing that, Hajime chuckled.

"Now where have I heard that before? Never thought someone who's supposed to be me would take that shit so seriously."

"....."

Of course, while the copy was a part of Hajime, it was also one of the labyrinth's trials. And it took its job seriously. It gave Hajime a strong glare, and Hajime shrugged.

"If that's what the definition of human is, then yeah, I guess I'm not human anymore. Maybe I really am a monster who was born in the abyss."

"A monster, huh? But—"

The copy trailed off when it saw Hajime's eyes. They were glowing with a radiant light, yet at the same time were as calm and still as the surface of a lake. His tone matched the look in his eyes and he said quietly but assuredly, "Sure, I might be rejected when I get home. I may not have anywhere to return to now. But even so, I'm going to keep moving forward."

"By deceiving yourself?"

"You really think this road was such an easy one that I could have traveled this far by deceiving myself?"

Hajime casually dismissed his copy's argument. Since his copy had Hajime's memories, it, of course, knew Hajime was right, so it had no choice but to fall silent.

"This is how it's always been. The opponents I've faced haven't been kind enough to wait for me to solve my problems. No matter what doubts or fears I've had, my only choice was to turn my resolve into a weapon and push my way forward."

That was just the kind of person Hajime Nagumo was. He'd been forced to throw away the part of him that was willing to face his own doubts and fears

head-on back in the abyss. But in return, he'd forged a will of iron and gained the ability to set his own feelings aside to focus on overcoming the obstacle at hand.

One could say that was just pure stubbornness on his end. It was by no means a praiseworthy trait. However, it was what had made Hajime strong. And it was that strength that had brought Hajime this far.

The numerous obstacles he'd overcome so far gave him that strength, and that strength bore down on the copy like some invisible force. Gulping, the copy took a step backward.

"Besides," Hajime added with a smile, "It's laughable to think the very labyrinths that shaped me are trying to deceive me with words now."

Hajime drew his weapons, signaling an end to the conversation. Smiling derisively at himself, the copy shook off Hajime's intimidating aura and said, "Do you really think a monster like you will be able to live a normal life?"

"At the very least, I know there's plenty of weirdos who like this monster."

So I'll be just fine... Hajime knew that if after all his struggles, he was once again forced to face that question, those weirdos would be there to help him.

"Oh yeah, there is one thing you're wrong about."

Hajime thought of the first weirdo who'd accepted him, and his glare turned murderous.

"It's not most. At best it's .1%."

"What?"

"You said most of my feelings for Yue stem from my dependence on her. But you're wrong, only .1% of them do. The remaining 99.9% is all love." This, too, was just a display of Hajime's stubbornness. But Hajime had decided to accept his feelings. Never would he feel guilty about what he thought of Yue. In fact, if the day ever came that his fear of being rejected overwhelmed him, he was confident he could tell Yue to her face that he wanted to cling to her for safety. He knew better than anyone that he was far from perfect. But he also knew that he could always rely on his beloved partner to make up for the things he

lacked and to help him overcome the worst parts of himself. Because he trusted Yue completely, he could ask her for anything.

The copy could feel the love and trust contained within Hajime's words and knew they were no lie.

"At least say it's 10%, you show-off."

The copy sighed. Since it had Hajime's personality, it should have been acting more or less like him. But it was also one of the labyrinth's trials, and that fact colored its thoughts and actions occasionally. Hajime ignored the shift in his copy's mental state and rushed forward. Once again, both fighters started firing Donner and Schlag at each other from point-blank range.

Like always, they were evenly matched and their attacks canceled each other out. However, slowly but surely, the balance began to shift. Hajime's bullets, kicks, Cross Bits, chakrams, and elbows were starting to connect more often than his copy's. He was proving here and now that that elbow from earlier had been no fluke.

"Gah, you've surpassed me? Impossible, I didn't feel myself getting any weaker."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"This is a trial about overcoming yourself. Every time you overcome your own negative emotions, your copy is supposed to get weaker. But if you avert your gaze from them, they get stronger."

"Huh, so that's how this works?"

As they talked, Hajime knocked his copy's Schlag out of its hands with Donner. It fell to the ground and spun away. Hajime took advantage of the opening and shot Schlag into his copy's side. Unable to withstand the impact, it staggered backward.

"But you haven't conquered your emotions. You've just stubbornly delayed thinking about them! I would know, since otherwise, I'd be getting weaker! Our combat strength should be equal, so why is it you're surpassing me!? I'm supposed to be you!"

The copy found it impossible to believe that someone who hadn't overcome their issues was capable of beating it in combat. Hajime was denying the very theme of the labyrinth itself, and that fact shook the copy to its core. Hajime replied casually, "Technically you're me from before we started fighting, right?"

"What... gah... do you mean!?"

This time Hajime crushed the copy's right arm, and Donner along with it. It tried to counter with a shotgun blast from its elbow, but Hajime dodged easily and shot a few more bullets through the copy's arm, destroying it completely. The fight had turned one-sided. Even though they had the same moves, the same speed, and the same thought processes, Hajime was starting to slowly outpace his copy.

The copy leaped backward and put some distance between them. The two Hajimes faced each other, but they no longer looked identical. The copy was bleeding all over, and its artificial arm no longer functioned.

"You don't get it? You were created from the data this labyrinth took of me. It probably took that data the moment I entered the maze, or a few minutes before I came to this room. In other words, you're me from half an hour ago, which means all I had to do was get stronger. That's all."

"No way... That's impossible!"

As impossible as it seemed, that was reality.

"You know, I'm grateful. Thanks to you, I was able to get a good look at my fighting style. I never thought I still had this many bad ticks and wasted movements."

"You mean you fixed all that in the middle of combat!? Impossible!"

The copy understood what Hajime was saying. But it found it unfathomable that anyone could actually do that. It trembled in fear and looked at Hajime as though he were a monster. On the other hand, Hajime just looked disappointed.

"You're me, so you really shouldn't deny yourself. Finding a path to survival through the jaws of death is how we've always come out alive. If I can just move a little bit faster, draw out a little bit more mana, hit with a little more force,

predict even half a move more, then I'll surpass my enemy. That's the mindset we've always fought with, isn't it?"

The copy stayed frozen in place for a few seconds, then drooped its shoulders. It then smiled bitterly and surrounded itself with its Cross Bits. It was preparing to fight bare-handed.

"Sheesh. I never thought I'd see the day someone powers their way through this trial with stubbornness alone. If you'd at least tried to deny your feelings, I would have grown strong enough to stand a chance."

"Don't be stupid. No matter what you did you wouldn't have stood a chance. After all, you're just a fake. I'm going to smash that annoying face of yours to bits."

"What are you, a masochist?"

Finally, the final round began. The battle was decided in an instant. There was another loud bang, but only one person was blown backward. The copy slumped against the far wall, its lower half blown clean off. Defeated, it started to grow translucent, like a mirage. It no longer had the strength to speak, but it smiled in satisfaction.

With a deep sigh, Hajime finally dropped his stance. But for good measure, he fired another three bullets into the head of the disappearing copy. It spasmed in pain, but before it could protest it turned into particles of light and vanished. Still, Hajime felt as though he heard the words "Learn to read the mood, you monster," echo through the room.

Holstering Donner and Schlag, Hajime sighed again. Finding nothing else in the room, he walked back over to the ice tree.

"....."

Hajime looked at his reflection, reminded once again of how different he was from the person who'd been summoned away from Japan. He reached out his hand and saw his callused palm reflected back at him. This was the palm that had slaughtered everyone who'd stood in his path. He stared at his face and palm for a few seconds, then balled his fingers into a fist.

"No matter what future's waiting for me, I won't stop struggling."

I can worry about whether I made the right choices or not later... Hajime smiled his usual fearless smile. Suddenly, one part of the ice wall melted away, inviting Hajime to head even deeper into the labyrinth. He turned on his heel and strode forward. Not once did he look back.

The blinding light around Shizuku faded. She quickly glanced around at her surroundings.

“Kaori?”

Kaori had been close enough to touch when they’d entered the gate of light, but she was nowhere to be seen now. Neither was anyone else. Shizuku was alone, at the entrance to a single corridor of ice. *We’ll always be alone.*

“Ah!”

Chills ran down Shizuku’s spine. She glanced about, searching for the source of the voice. But no matter where she looked, all she saw was herself. She felt her heart squeeze up. *How weak can you get? Freaking out the moment you end up alone?*

“Nagumo-kun...”

Still, she ended up unconsciously calling out Hajime’s name. That ended up surprising her even more than the fact that she’d gotten so weak. Panicking, she kept telling herself it was just a slip of the tongue and didn’t mean anything.

There was no one else to protect her here. Besides, Shizuku Yaegashi herself was meant to be protecting others, not being protected. That was how it had been all this time. And that was how it would continue to be.

“So I’m fine.”

Shizuku squeezed her eyes shut and slapped her cheeks. She was perhaps a bit too enthusiastic in trying to pep herself up, as her slap echoed loudly down the hallway. Rubbing her swelling cheeks, Shizuku walked down the corridor. Her back was straight, and she was looking aloof and dignified.

I’m fine. I’ll be fine... She told herself that over and over as she gripped the hilt of her katana to calm herself.

“Wait, that’s...”

Finally, she spotted a faint light at the end of the corridor. As she got closer she realized she was looking at a large room with a giant ice tree glowing at its center. At the base of the tree trunk, she spotted a humanoid figure. Thinking it was one of her comrades, Shizuku smiled in relief and sprinted forward. But it wasn’t.

“Welcome, me.”

“Wh-What...”

A shiver ran down her spine, and Shizuku ground to a halt. It wasn’t one of her comrades waiting for her. But it wasn’t a stranger either. It was someone who shouldn’t have existed.

“Why are you here? You’re just supposed to be—”

“A dream?”

The figure grinned at Shizuku, and it felt as though a bucket of cold water had just been poured over her head. Standing in front of her was the “White Shizuku” she’d only seen in her dreams. Her ponytail was pure white, as was her porcelain skin. Even the katana at her waist and the clothes she wore were white. Only her eyes were gleaming a dark crimson.

Shizuku’s nightmare had come to life. Unable to comprehend the reality in front of her, Shizuku took a step back. White Shizuku, which was the copy made by the labyrinth, took a step forward in return. It drew its white katana in one smooth, elegant motion.

“Get it together, me. If you don’t, you’ll be dead before you know it.”

With light steps, the copy dashed forward. It used a combination of No Tempo and Supersonic Step to make its movements unpredictable. To Shizuku, it looked as though it had disappeared.

“Ah!”

Despite her surprise, Shizuku knew to trust in her instincts and experience. Faster than she could think, she grabbed her katana in her left hand and swung it to the right. There was a sharp metallic clang as the two swords collided.

“I see now... This is a trial. A trial to see if I can overcome myself.”

“You need to be faster than that.”

The copy was referring both to Shizuku’s speed of thought, and her movements. As if to prove her point, while Shizuku was focused on pushing her copy’s sword back, it swung at Shizuku with its sheath. However, Shizuku had been prepared for that. After all, purposely diverting an opponent’s attention with the sword while attacking with the sheath was one of her own Yaegashi-style techniques, Swallow’s Gambit. Shizuku pushed off her copy’s blade and backstepped away from the sheath. However—

“Shock Slugger.”

“Gah!”

“I said you needed to be faster,” the copy said with a smile. Shizuku had predicted the attack, but the copy had known she would, and so had added a follow-up attack to that as well. The shockwaves hit Shizuku’s side, and she was launched like a pinball. She hit the ground with a painful thud and rolled across it like a dead fish.

“That’s enough pleasantries. Stop daydreaming.”

Shizuku’s copy sneered. Gritting her teeth, Shizuku got back to her feet and turned to face her copy.

“This is reality. *We* are both real. Now fight your way past us. Prove that our sharpened blade can overcome even ourselves. If not, we will perish here!”

Once again, the copy used No Tempo and Supersonic Step to close the distance between them. The erratic movements brought on by No Tempo combined with the speed of Supersonic Step made it impossible for most people to follow with the naked eye.

Ignoring the throbbing of her sides, Shizuku activated the same two skills and joined her copy in the world of extreme speed. Sparks danced in the air as the two clashed. The two Shizukus then appeared with their backs facing each other before turning instantly.

“Gale!”

“Hah!”

Shouting simultaneously, they brought their katanas down on each other. Both put everything they had into their swings, trying to find an opening.

After a brief flurry, they once again vanished, then reappeared elsewhere. The process repeated itself over and over, and the air in the room was filled with sparks. Those sparks were reflected a dozen times over by the ceiling, floor, and walls, giving the room the appearance of a world dyed in orange.

Supersonic Step only allowed the user to dash in a straight line, so in order to add even more complexity to their movements, Shizuku and her copy activated Supersonic Step within Supersonic Step. By layering multiple Supersonic Steps on top of each other, they were able to freely change direction and accelerate even faster as well.

The sounds of their clashes and the sparks they created were the only proof that they existed at all; that was how fast they were moving.

The copy slashed diagonally downward, and Shizuku dodged by a hair's breadth. But an instant later the copy switched grips and swung sideways with her sheath instead. This was another one of the Yaegashi-style techniques, Mountain Tempest. Shizuku blocked that attack with her katana, then stepped forward and aimed an elbow at her copy's blind spot.

This too was a Yaegashi-style technique, Thunderclap. The moment Shizuku's elbow sunk into her copy's stomach, her copy used it as a pivot point to rotate all the way around and launch another lightning-fast sword slash at Shizuku.

That was yet another Yaegashi-style technique, Slipstream. Shizuku dodged her copy's attack by letting her own momentum carry her forward and adding a jump to speed up. Then she instantly cast multiple Supersonic Steps to get behind her copy and redrew the sword she's sheathed mid-flight. There was a sharp snick as it cleared the scabbard. Shizuku's drawing skill was so impressive that her katana moved faster than the eye could follow. It didn't even leave an afterimage behind. But of course, her copy was just as skilled. It unsheathed its own katana at the same timing and speed as Shizuku's and the two blades clashed. There was a metallic screech and the shock of the impact ran down the arms of both combatants.

Unfortunately, Shizuku was the one pushed back. Her copy had also had the power of centrifugal force behind her draw, which had been enough to overpower Shizuku. Eyes wild, Shizuku's copy smiled menacingly and put a hand to its mouth. It then leaped forward with its katana held high. With its spare hand, it pressed its sheath against the back of its blade, forming a cross.

This was one of the Yaegashi-style finishing moves, Helm Splitter. By driving one's blade into the opponents' helmet, then following that up by pounding the sheath down on the blade, the user was able to cut through helmet and head in one clean stroke. It was one of the few power techniques in the Yaegashi arsenal. Furthermore, the magic of this fantasy world had given Shizuku the tools needed to bring her gruesome finishing move to the next level.

"Flash Blitz!"

"Ngh... Flash Blitz!"

Only a spatial-magic imbued skill could block another spatial-magic imbued skill. However, Shizuku was off-balance, and she knew better than anyone the power Helm Splitter had even without magic. Even if her Flash Blitz canceled out the spatial magic component of her copy's Flash Blitz, she'd still get her head split open.

That was why Shizuku unleashed another one of her techniques while fighting back her panic. As their blades clashed, Shizuku desperately deflected the brunt of the attack and quickly reversed the grip on her blade. She then angled her katana to slide her copy's white katana away from her and slashed upward using her backhanded grip.

This was the Yaegashi-style technique, Blade Reversal. It was meant to be a counter, and Shizuku executed it perfectly. However, her copy was as familiar with her moves as she was and casually dodged the slice by a paper-thin margin. Then, with movements so fluid they pissed Shizuku off, it backflipped away from her.

Shizuku wasted no time in launching a follow-up attack. Watching someone who looked exactly like her fight using her moves annoyed her to no end. She wanted to get this trial over with as soon as possible.

"Oh, are you planning on averting your eyes from the truth again?"

“What’re you—”

That was enough to rattle Shizuku. Her concentration slipped for a moment, and her copy took advantage of that. It slipped underneath Shizuku’s guard and grabbed her arm, then twirled around and executed a perfect Aikido throw.

As her field of vision flipped upside down, Shizuku instinctively crossed her katana and sheath together to guard her head. Her timing was perfect, and she managed to block the copy’s follow-up kick.

That was another one of the Yaegashi-style techniques, Mirror Bolt. First, the user threw the opponent using Aikido, then attacked them while they were trapped mid-air. But even though she blocked the kick, the impact of the blow made Shizuku black out for a second. She barely managed to take a defensive stance as she sailed through the air and rolled across the ground. Vision blurry, she realized the attack had hurt less than the words her copy had hurled at her.

“Pathetic,” her copy scoffed. That one word was as sharp as her katana. Shizuku desperately wanted to argue back, but she was at a loss for words. And she didn’t have the time to find any. Because she was once again thrust in the world of supersonic slices and deadly thrusts. Flashes of white and black clashed over and over, cutting through the air.

When it came to pure swordsmanship skill, no one in the world could match those two. They continued unleashing high-level techniques one after another, struggling to land a deathblow.

But both sides were evenly matched. Or so it seemed at first glance. However, as time passed, an ugly truth reared its head. Every time Shizuku saw her copy’s piercing eyes, memories of the past bubbled up. It was just like the daydream she’d seen in Haltina’s labyrinth. Every one of the memories that surfaced was something she’d locked away deep inside her heart. She thought she’d kept them contained, but now they began to ooze out and pierce her heart like stakes.

Each time she felt the pain of her own memories, it was accompanied by a physical pain as well. Her movements slowed with each stake pierced through her heart, giving her copy openings to cut her. In minutes, Shizuku was covered in small cuts. Her copy was outmaneuvering and overpowering her.

“Haaaaaaaah!” Shizuku was slowly being driven into a corner. Impatience began to dull her movements. She shouted in an attempt to clear her mind and launched a series of hyper-fast attacks, but it wasn’t enough.

“My, you’re getting sloppy.”

Even though she unleashed multiple strikes in less than a second, the copy dodged them all. Not a single one so much as grazed her. To top it off, she even had time to launch a counter after Shizuku messed up one of her attacks. The copy’s figure blurred, and a second later its katana was heading straight for Shizuku’s forehead.

“Ah!?”

Her copy leaned back even as it stepped forward, messing with Shizuku’s sense of perspective. Caught up in the technique, Shizuku hurriedly shook her head and tried to backstep out of the way. She couldn’t dodge the attack completely though, and her copy’s katana scraped her temple.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t be relieved with just that. Her copy had used another Yaegashi-style technique, Mist Piercer. And Shizuku knew it wasn’t over yet.

The reaper’s scythe was still at her throat. Because her panicked dodge had broken her balance, she was in no position to dodge the second and third thrusts that were still to come. So instead—

“Shock Slugger!”

Despite feeling as though her heart had been frozen over, Shizuku slammed the ground with her sheath and activated Shock Slugger before her copy’s second thrust reached her. Pulverized shards of ice shot toward it, serving as a makeshift buckshot. The copy used its momentum to execute a turn, and danced past Shizuku. Its white ponytail fluttered elegantly in the breeze as it passed.

At the same time, Shizuku stepped away, putting some distance between her and her copy. It nonchalantly returned its katana to its sheath and sneered at Shizuku.

“Thank god you have that gift he gave you. If not for that, you would have

died seven times over.”

“Haaah... Haaah...” Shizuku didn’t rise to her copy’s taunt. Panting heavily, she observed her opponent in silence. However, her expression was clearly pained. Were her injuries finally getting to her? Or was she frustrated her sword couldn’t reach her opponent? Or was she in pain because her copy’s words were cutting her to ribbons?

The copy’s sneer grew wider, to the point where it was hard to imagine the real Shizuku ever making a face like that. It thrust Shizuku’s shortcomings and negative emotions before her, its words dripping with venom.

“Hey, does it hurt? Are you scared? Do you feel like crying? Go ahead, no need to hide it. I’m you, so I already know everything about you. *Everything.*”

Only fifteen minutes had passed since the start of the fight. That had been all it had taken for Shizuku to end up a bloody, sweaty mess. Blood dripped from her temple, down her cheek, and onto the floor, a symbol of just how badly Shizuku was faring.

On the other hand, her copy was completely unhurt. There wasn’t even a speck of dust or ice on its clothes. The beautiful, all-knowing copy of Shizuku hurled more painful truths at her.

“You never even wanted to learn swordsmanship, did you? You loved frilly western dresses a lot more than stiff Japanese clothes. You never wanted a practice sword. All you wanted were cute dolls and pretty accessories!”

“Shut up.”

Shizuku had been four when her grandfather had put a wooden sword in her hands. He had been the head of the Yaegashi dojo at the time, and he’d really just done it as a joke. But even at the tender age of four, Shizuku’s talent with the sword had been noticeable.

“That’s amazing, Shizuku! You might just be a genius!”

That was the only time Shizuku could remember her grandfather had smiled. Even now, Shizuku remembered the way he’d beamed and ruffled her hair.

That was why she’d taken up the sword. She made kendo and swordsmanship

a part of her life. Her grandfather, father, and all the other people in the dojo praised her to no end. But even as a child, she knew they were placing their expectations on her, so she gave it her all. She trained hard, without once complaining. But in truth—

“When Kouki first came to your dojo, you thought a prince had come to sweep you off your feet, didn’t you? What did he say back then? Oh yeah, ‘I’ll protect you, Shizuku-chan!’ When he said that, you thought he was like a knight out of some fairy tale. You were so sure he’d treat you like the girl you wanted to be. He’d protect you. He’d take care of you. That was what you believed. But well, you know what happened.”

“Shut up.”

Gritting her teeth, Shizuku shot forward and drew her katana. She lashed out with a lightning-fast Flash Blitz, intent on cutting her copy in half. But naturally, her copy countered with the same move, and their blades clashed once more.

Unwilling to give up, Shizuku pushed forward with a series of cuts. Overhand, diagonal, backhanded, underhand, horizontal, she used every technique in her arsenal. But every single one was sidestepped, parried, or blocked. And the moment she showed even the slightest opening, her copy nicked her again. Shizuku backed off, dripping with blood. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

“But in the end, all Kouki brought us was jealousy. Since elementary school, he’s been kind and always done what’s right. All the girls loved him. So of course they couldn’t stand it when he chose to hang out with us instead. We had short hair, wore plain clothes, and the only topic we could talk about was swordsmanship. There wasn’t a single girly thing about us.”

Even though she was in the middle of a life-or-death struggle, the only thing Shizuku could think about was those memories from elementary school. Back then, she’d kept her hair short and only worn boring clothes. Sure, she was still pretty, but nothing about her could have been called girly.

Naturally, the other girls weren’t going to stay quiet when Kouki decided to hang out with someone like her, and it was precisely because they were kids that they could be cruel. Reliving those bitter memories caused Shizuku to slip

up again, and her copy got another cut on her. The pain of that cut dredged up yet another painful memory.

“That’s right. You still remember those words, don’t you? Those words that girl who loved Kouki told you.”

Stop it! But Shizuku’s copy was an expression of her own heart, and it wasn’t done tormenting her yet.

“You were a girl?”

“That was a real shock, wasn’t it?”

“Not another word!”

Shizuku would never forget those words. Despite how she looked and acted, Shizuku was still a girl. She’d been unbelievably hurt when she’d heard those words. Even though she’d wanted so bad to make other female friends, she hadn’t been able to.

That had been the first time she’d wished someone else would protect her. That was how shocking those words had been. And so she’d turned to Kouki, the one boy who’d promised to protect her. But all Kouki had said was, “I’m sure they didn’t mean any harm. They’re all good girls, so we can work things out if we just talk to them.”

By that time, Kouki had already convinced himself that all people were fundamentally good. Understanding the subtleties of a girl’s fragile heart was beyond him.

Naturally, the ally of justice Kouki had gone to settle things with the girls. And naturally, that had only made things worse for Shizuku. The only thing that had changed was the other girls started being more crafty to keep Kouki from catching on. After that, no matter how many times Shizuku went to Kouki for help, to him it was already a settled matter. He would just give her a troubled smile, and over time Shizuku came to stop relying on Kouki.

She kept going like that for a few years. Had she not met Kaori in fourth grade, she shuddered to think what might have become of her. It was quite possible she would have given up on living if not for Kaori.

“You never really wanted to do swordsmanship, but you were afraid of betraying your family’s expectations, so you couldn’t give it up. Kouki was the reason for all of your suffering, but you couldn’t bring yourself to push away your oblivious childhood friend... At the end of the day, you’re just an indecisive, half-assed girl.”

“That’s not... Ah!?”

By the time Shizuku realized it, it was too late. Her copy’s white katana had cut through the tether of gravity holding her to the floor. As she was assailed by weightlessness, her copy swung its sheath at her. It was planning to hit her with another Shock Slugger.

Shockwaves of white mana radiated out from the sheath, and the copy hit Shizuku so hard she nearly lost consciousness. The attack blew her away, sending her bouncing across the ground. She slid another few meters after that before coming to a stop.

“*Cough... Cough...*” Shizuku coughed up droplets of blood. Her ribs were on fire. At least two or three of them had been broken from that attack. Her internal organs weren’t in great shape either.

Tears blurring her vision, Shizuku desperately tried to keep herself from drifting off into unconsciousness. She didn’t even have the strength to stand, and could only listen helplessly as her copy’s footsteps drew close.

Sensing her impending death, Shizuku struggled to get up. But her stamina was drained, and she could barely move.

The copy leaned close to Shizuku and grinned devilishly. In a kind voice, it whispered, “You don’t have to get back up, you know? If you just give up here, I’ll let you live. You don’t have to always be the one working hard. Let someone else handle things for a change. They’ll manage. Now sleep.”

“What do you...”

“It’s a simple choice. Give up and sleep. Or keep struggling and die a painful death.”

The copy was confident Shizuku would never beat it. And if Shizuku refused to surrender, it wouldn’t hesitate to cut her to pieces. As if to prove its point, the

copy grinned evilly and thrust its katana toward Shizuku. Shizuku's blood was still dripping from its edge, reminding her that the white katana in front of her really might be what kills her. The red of her blood contrasted starkly with the pure white of her copy's blade.

With each drop that fell to the ice below, Shizuku could feel more of her own life slowly bleeding away. Still doubled over in pain, Shizuku paled. But in the next instant, she glared at her copy and struggled to get up. Despite the fact that she was coughing up blood, she somehow managed to rise to her knees.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

"Yes, of course. We would get back up."

Narrowing its eyes, the copy swung its katana down at Shizuku. Still on her knees, Shizuku raised her katana to block. At the same time—

"Soar - Severance!"

She used one of her repulsion skills to blow the copy away and get herself some space. Her copy did a lithe somersault in midair and gracefully landed back on its feet. Meanwhile, Shizuku slowly rose to a standing position.

"Quit yapping. I'm not here to listen to all of your bullshit. And your psychological warfare tactics won't work on me."

"Psychological warfare, huh? You realize these are your own emotions, right? I can't believe even at this age you're still so stubborn, using force to get things to go your way. And you're always taking care of other people... even though you're the one who wishes someone would take care of you..."

"How many times do I have to tell you to shut up!?"

Shizuku charged forward, her usual composure nowhere to be seen. She had no strategy in mind. She just wanted to force her opponent to shut up. And as a result, her swing was sloppy.

The copies the labyrinth created were reflections of the challengers' hearts. If the challengers averted their eyes from their true feelings, the copies grew stronger. On the other hand, if the challengers accepted their emotions and inner turmoil, then the copies grew weaker. But right now, Shizuku was

undoubtedly doing the former. So naturally, her copy was growing stronger. Blocking Shizuku's sluggish cuts was mere child's play for it as it was now. Shizuku's copy easily blocked her desperate attack and struck back with a powerful technique.

Shizuku was already suffering from blood loss, multiple broken ribs, and damaged internal organs, so she had no hope of dodging. She suffered yet another injury, which caused her to grow more impatient, which in turn caused her movements to become even slower. She was stuck in a fatal negative feedback loop.

"That was how it was when you first came to this world too. Really, you were scared. You were terrified of fighting demons like Ishtar wanted. The night after you killed your first monster, you cried where no one would find you. The sensation of cutting through flesh wouldn't leave you, and it felt like no matter how many times you washed your hands, there was still blood on them."

"Shaaaa!" Shizuku let out a war cry as she swung, trying to block out her copy's words. But her actions only proved that she was rejecting her own feelings, thus making her copy even stronger. It easily blocked her attack and countered with another barrage of pointed words.

"Back when Nagumo-kun fell into the abyss, if you hadn't focused all your efforts on consoling Kaori, you know you would have been crushed by the fear of death. Ever since that day, you've been afraid of dying, and you've been afraid of killing... You've been ruled by terror."

"Agh!?"

Shizuku's copy hit her with a Thunder Blossom, and the jolt of electricity called Shizuku to stiffen up. While she was stunned, the copy's white katana slid past her throat. Blood spurted out, dyeing the blade red. That last attack had just barely missed Shizuku's carotid artery. But it had been a pure fluke that she'd been able to dodge it at all. Her stiffened muscles hadn't been able to support her, and she'd slid to the ground. That was the only thing that had saved her from instant death.

Shizuku clapped her hand to her neck, but blood continued spilling between her fingers. Even if the cut had missed her artery, neck wounds bled a great

deal.

The fear of death washed over Shizuku, and she nearly drowned in despair. Though she did her best to remain composed, the hand holding her katana started shaking.

Her copy looked disdainfully down at her. This time it decided to hit Shizuku in her most sensitive spot. Her Achilles heel. It said coldly, “Hey. You were really happy back then, weren’t you?”

“Huh?”

Still holding her neck, Shizuku looked up in confusion.

“When Nagumo-kun came to save you. I know, since I’m you. That was the most dramatic moment of our lives, after all.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“In that desperate situation... you’d completely given up. You’d accepted the unreasonable death waiting for you. You didn’t believe there was anyone out there who’d gallantly jump in to save you anymore. So when he’d jumped in and overwhelmed the enemies that had given you so much trouble, you were smitten. His crimson mana and broad back had you completely captivated.”

“N-No, I—”

This was the one thing Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to accept. Something horrible would happen if she did, so of course she tried to object. But of course, her objections were meaningless against a copy of her own heart.

“It was the same when Kaori was killed. If you weren’t aware of it yourself then, I’ll spell it out for you. For the first time since coming to this world, you’d clung to something other than yourself. You’d clung to Nagumo-kun. He’d told you to believe in him and wait. And unlike everyone else, he kept his promise. Just like you believed, he saved your best friend and your own heart. After that moment, you desperately tried to hide your feelings from yourself... but you can’t deceive yourself any longer.”

“No, stop. I don’t...”

Shizuku had lost all will to fight. She no longer had that aloof, intimidating

aura around her either. All she could do was shake her head in denial like a child. She couldn't even put up a facade of strength. The walls that had protected her heart crumbled like an eggshell. After laying her heart bare, her copy mercilessly stung her with the words she couldn't bear to hear.

"You and I... We love Nagumo-kun."

"Ah..."

Shizuku trailed off, unable to speak. She was still shaking her head, causing more blood to spill out of her neck. But her thoughts were in too much turmoil for her to notice that. These were the only feelings she absolutely refused to accept. Because she knew she wasn't allowed to have them.

If she admitted she loved Hajime, that would be the same as betraying Kaori. She'd been so mentally cornered that she couldn't even argue back, but her copy wasn't done with her yet. It offered one last remark, like a funeral prayer.

"You fell in love with your best friend's crush. You traitor."

"....."

Shizuku crumpled to her knees. Her spirit was shattered. She no longer had any will left to resist at all. That was how damning those words had been.

For most people, regulating their emotions was impossibly difficult. Those who could control them completely were abnormal. Naturally, emotions such as love were no different. In fact, they were even harder to control because they had no logical basis. Which was why even if Shizuku did fall in love with the same person Kaori did, that alone could hardly be called a betrayal.

However, her copy, or in other words a manifestation of her own negative emotions, had claimed it was betrayal. And that meant Shizuku's naturally serious disposition had trapped her into thinking it really was. It was because she was so thankful to Kaori for sticking with her through the worst times of her life that anything even remotely resembling betrayal pained her so.

She cared so much for Kaori that even liking Hajime felt like something unforgivable to her. Especially because she'd already shown Hajime so many sides of her that she hadn't intended to. Her genuine smile, her pathetic crying face as she clung to him begging for help, the pouty look she normally reserved

for Kaori, her relieved sleeping face, her spaced out face... The fact that she'd done all that without telling Kaori made her feel even more guilty about it.

"What's worse, you even attacked Shea. Do you want to know why? Why neither Kaori nor Yue, but Shea?"

"I..."

"The answer's simple. It's because you were jealous of Shea. You knew you stood no chance against Yue from the beginning. Even if you attacked her, you'd just be destroyed. And of course you'd never want to direct your jealousy at Kaori. So you picked Shea because she was the easiest to be jealous of. After all, she'd just been accepted as Hajime's lover. What a cowardly woman."

"....."

Shizuku could no longer avert her eyes from the truth. The enemy standing before her wouldn't allow it. No matter how she tried to argue against her copy's barbed words, she was shot down. The strength drained from her limbs, while her copy continued to grow in power.

It dashed forward, using No Tempo to make its movements unpredictable. Shizuku didn't bother to react. Though even if she'd had any fighting spirit left, she wouldn't have been able to react to such fast movements. The copy's kick hit Shizuku squarely in the stomach, and she flew into the air.

"Agh!?"

Screaming in pain, she flew in a wide arc. A torrent of cuts rained down on her. Shizuku instinctively raised her katana to defend herself, but she was too exhausted to guard against them all.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Her body was riddled with gashes. Her copy then slammed down on her with its sheath. Feeling as though she'd just been hit by a dump truck, Shizuku flew backward into the wall behind her. The force of the impact crushed the ice around her. The air was driven from her lungs, and it felt as though all the bones in her body shattered. Everything hurt, and her body was at its limits.

Shizuku slid limply to the ground, her back resting against the broken wall.

Blood pooled all around her, creating a puddle in the floor. She already looked dead.

Vision blurry, she looked up to see her copy walking over to her. She couldn't move a muscle. And the mental damage she'd suffered had drained her of the will to even try.

"Looks like this is the end of your pathetic life. The whole time you willingly kept drawing the short straw. This only happened because you were stupid enough to keep denying yourself the things *you* wanted."

Shizuku couldn't answer. She didn't have the strength to. However, a faint flicker of fear lit up within her eyes.

"Any last words? I'll carve them into the ice for you. All of these spaces are connected, so if you're lucky, maybe someone else will clear their trial and come here to see your last will."

"....." Shizuku said nothing. But a single tear rolled down her cheek. The tiny bead of light fell down her chin and created a small stain on her lap.

Shizuku couldn't tell why she was crying. Was she afraid of dying? Despairing that her future had been stolen from her? Frustrated that she hadn't been able to argue back? Sad because she'd never see her friends and family again? Or all of those reasons combined?

Shizuku's copy looked down at her and silently pulled back its katana. It held the other hand holding its sheath forward as if drawing an imaginary bow. The point of its katana was aimed directly at Shizuku's head. The white katana was every bit as sharp as Shizuku's black one. Meaning piercing a human skull was a simple matter for it. Shizuku would die instantly, without feeling pain. That was the final mercy her copy was willing to afford her.

Bloodlust started radiating from Shizuku's copy. It was time to deal the finishing blow. But the moment Shizuku saw her death readying itself in front of her, something welled up within her. She opened her mouth, and without caring about appearances, muttered her true feelings.

"I... don't want to die... yet..."

"....."

For once, those weren't words she'd said for someone else's sake. They were her true, honest feelings.

She didn't want to die yet. She wanted to see her comrades, her family, and her best friend again. She wanted to see the man she'd fallen in love with again. But she could no longer stand on her own. She was exhausted, both physically and mentally. Which was why—

“Save me... Someone please... save me...”

She begged to be rescued, crying like a baby. Her whole life, Shizuku had been relied on, clung to, and asked favors of. And her whole life, she'd answered everyone's expectations. No matter how much it pained her she'd always smiled and said, “Don't worry, leave it to me.”

This was the first time she'd cried, the first time she'd actually asked someone else to save her. But she couldn't keep going on her own.

She'd always wanted to be the princess who others protected, but because everyone had relied on her, she'd kept polishing her skills until she'd become the knight who protects others.

Little wonder she'd ended up playing that role in her last year of high school. Shizuku knew her best friend had gotten angry on her behalf. But even so, she hadn't been able to change herself. And in time, she'd gotten so used to being the one to draw the short straw that she'd come to accept it as natural. But in truth, she still—

“What a shame. It's too late now. You should have said those words ages ago.”

At the very end, she'd been able to be honest with herself, but her copy was merciless. It lowered its stance and thrust its katana forward.

Shizuku squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the razor-sharp blade to pierce her brain.

.....

.....

.....

“Impossible...”

The death she was waiting for never came. When she’d shut her eyes, Shizuku had felt the wall at her back vanish, but right now she was more interested in why her copy sounded so shocked. Timidly, Shizuku opened her eyes. The first thing her eyes saw was—

“H-Huh?”

“Jeez, I can’t believe it’d send me here at just the right time. Was the labyrinth aiming for this or something?”

Her copy’s white blade, millimeters from her face. And holding onto it was a familiar mechanical arm. That mechanical arm was what had stopped the copy’s blade from running Shizuku through. Shizuku’s eyes went wide, and she looked over her shoulder. It was him.

“N-Nagumo-kun?”

The boy she’d fallen in love with. The one she always dreamed of when on the verge of death. It was unbelievable, but also somehow natural. Hajime’s appearance wasn’t just a delusion. The wall at Shizuku’s back had vanished, revealing a passageway. It was from that passageway that Hajime had appeared. It was also his hand that was holding Shizuku up. Still, Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to believe it. She stared blankly at Hajime, whose face was inches from her own.

“Tch, you look dead.”

Hajime looked down at Shizuku with a frown, then shot her copy a bestial glare. Shivering, the copy tried to retreat to safety, but before it could move, crimson sparks ran down Hajime’s prosthetic arm. A second later, there was a high-pitched whirring, and his arm started vibrating at a high frequency.

“You little—”

The copy hurriedly tried to pull the blade out of Hajime’s grip with all its might, but its decision came too late. Faced with the full might of Hajime’s oscillation, the copy’s katana started to crack. With a metallic screech, Hajime crushed part of the blade, snapping it in half. Then, he pointed his prosthetic limb at the copy. With a faint whirring, a panel in his palm slid back to reveal a

dark grey muzzle.

“You get out of here for a bit.”

“Ah!”

The copy's expression stiffened. A second later, an explosive slug shot out of Hajime's hand and slammed into the copy's stomach. Crimson shockwaves spread out from the point of impact, and the copy was sent flying. Hajime then summoned a few Cross Bits from his Treasure Trove and sent them after it. He had no intention of killing Shizuku's copy, but he did need to buy some time. The seven Cross Bits worked in perfect coordination, keeping the copy occupied.

As the sounds of battle grew further away, Shizuku turned around and examined Hajime's face properly. She still couldn't believe this was real. Blood loss had made her thoughts dull, and some part of her kept telling her she wasn't worthy of a miracle like this.

If this is a dream, I hope I never wake up... Shizuku was terrified of waking up to find a world without Hajime. While she was thinking to herself, Hajime pulled a test tube out of his Treasure Trove. He ripped the cap off with his teeth and poured its contents into Shizuku's mouth.

“Mmmpf!?”

“Don't spit it out. You better drink it all.”

Surprised at the foreign liquid that was suddenly filling her mouth, Shizuku instinctively started to gag. However, Hajime put his hands around Shizuku and held her in place, forcing her to drink. He absolutely would not let her spit this out. It was one of his precious few remaining vials of Ambrosia. Hajime was going to make her drink this even if he had to shove it down her throat with his bare hands. He glared harshly down at Shizuku, and her protests grew weaker. In fact, she stiffened up completely. Not only had Hajime just hugged her, but his face was also close enough to kiss if there wasn't a vial in her mouth. Shizuku could feel his warmth, and that calmed her.

She obediently swallowed the vial's contents and stared intently at Hajime's face. She looked like a baby drinking from a bottle. But she was too busy

drowning in Hajime's eyes to be worried about how she looked. She wouldn't look away, not even for a second. She wanted to keep staring into those eyes forever.

Eventually, she downed the vial's contents, and her wounds vanished as though they'd never existed. Unfortunately, the Ambrosia couldn't replace the blood she'd lost, so she was still weak. However, she was now lucid enough to realize this was indeed reality, and that if Hajime had come another second later, she would have died.

"Is it really you, Nagumo-kun?"

"Do I look like anyone else?"

"B-But why... How are you here? I thought I..."

"Calm down. After I cleared my trial, I started going down the passage that appeared, and ended up here."

"Th-Then you really..."

The tears that had stopped before once again started spilling down Shizuku's face. But this time, they were tears of relief. Hajime was taken aback. This was the first time he'd seen Shizuku cry. He was so stunned that he didn't even react when Shizuku reached out to touch his face. She looked up at him as though he were the only thing in the world, and tried to touch him to confirm he was really there. But the moment before her fingertips brushed his cheeks, she trembled, then stopped. Expression twisting in pain, Shizuku pulled her hand back. Then, realizing being hugged was something she couldn't allow, she pushed Hajime off of her. She wiped her tears with her sleeve and looked away.

Hajime guessed Shizuku's strange behavior was a result of what her copy had done to her and smiled knowingly. He turned to see that the copy had already regenerated its katana, and was starting to beat back his Cross Bits.

"Alright, your wounds are all healed up. It's time for your revenge match. Go beat that fake up."

"Ah. B-But I... can't beat her, so..." Shizuku gave Hajime an imploring look, knowing she sounded like she was whining.

Oh god she didn't just get beat up by her copy, she had her heart completely shattered! Hajime looked up at the ceiling in resignation. He'd always thought Shizuku was the strongest out of Kouki's party, but it seemed he'd been mistaken.

Shizuku's copy had started weaving through Hajime's Cross Bits and was steadily closing the distance between it and Shizuku. Hajime knew there was no point in clearing Shizuku's trial for her, so he'd set his Cross Bits to move in a somewhat predictable pattern, but he hadn't expected the copy to see through it so quickly.

He looked back at Shizuku, and she was clearly cowering away from her copy. Seeing her curled up in a ball like this, Hajime narrowed his eyes.

This isn't like her. This isn't like her at all. But maybe this is who she really is... Hajime scratched his head awkwardly, then gave Shizuku a serious look.

"N-Nagumo-kun? Umm, she's getting closer..."

"Yaegashi. Don't worry."

"Huh?"

Shizuku could feel the blood rising to her face as she met Hajime's gaze. That serious look was enough to make her melt and forget all about how scared she was of her copy. Now that she'd had the truth thrust in her face, she couldn't help but notice how much she liked Hajime. Even though she knew these feelings of hers were a betrayal, she couldn't help but feel excited.

Hajime ignored the oddities in Shizuku's reaction and pulled something out of his Treasure Trove.

"Here, take this. I made this Pink Mask Mk. II for you. It'll keep you safe."

"...Nagumo-kun?"

Seeing that mask was enough to make Shizuku forget how infatuated she was with Hajime, and how badly she'd just been beaten up. She glared at Hajime, and even her copy was so stunned by this turn of events that it stopped advancing toward Shizuku.

However, Hajime remained completely serious. He pushed the needlessly

elaborate full-face pink mask onto Shizuku. Then, he smiled and gave her a thumbs up.

“Nagumo-kun! This isn’t the time to be messing around! She’ll be here any second!”

“How rude. I’m not messing around. Listen up, I’ve used sublimation magic on everything I’ve made, including this pink mask. Listen and be amazed. Putting this on will triple your reflexes and perception. With this, you’ll be able to beat your copy.”

“Wh-Why did you make it so strong?”

“You love cute things like this, right? Go on, take it. After all, you’re the only one fit to wear this pink mask, Yaegashi—”

“I don’t need it! I can win even without that embarrassing piece of crap! Hell, I’d rather fight to the death than wear that thing! I don’t ever want to be treated like a weirdo again!”

Shizuku vehemently pushed the mask back into Hajime’s hands, then rubbed her temples in frustration. Her exasperated expression and mannerisms were just like her old self.

Hajime grinned at the revived Shizuku and tossed the Pink Mask Mk. II back into his Treasure Trove. Shizuku gave him a blank look and he said, “That’s exactly right. You can win even without this.”

“I-I...”

Realizing she’d been had, Shizuku grimaced. Ignoring her reaction, Hajime added, “You have to remember, Yaegashi. That fake might be a part of you, but it’s not all of you. It’s just a Frankenstein monster of all your worst traits. The Shizuku Yaegashi in front of me is the one who has all the parts that really matter. Right?”

“I have all the parts that really matter...”

With that, other memories surfaced in Shizuku’s mind. She remembered how every time she’d achieved something, her family had been there celebrating wholeheartedly for her. She remembered the joy she’d felt at helping people in

need. She remembered how grateful the people she'd saved had been. She remembered the fun times she'd spent with Kouki and the others. She remembered the time she first met Kaori. All of those moments were irreplaceable, unforgettable memories too.

Her life hadn't been all hardship. There had been good things too. The smiles she'd given others hadn't all been lies.

How could I have forgotten about all of this until now? The answer was simple. The whispers the party been hearing since entering the maze had been manipulating them to forget. It felt as though a ray of light had opened up in the dark clouds that had been covering Shizuku's heart. More and more continued opening up until the dark clouds had receded entirely, and she was bathed in sunlight.

Determination burned anew in Shizuku's eyes. And that determination gave her strength.

"The fact that your copy's words got to you is proof that you're trying to overcome yourself. Only failures try to power through with pure stubbornness... Anyway, you take things too seriously. You've gotta learn to loosen up sometimes. Remember, as long as you're alive, you can always find a way to make things work out."

"Nagumo-kun..."

"Just so you know, I'm one of those failures that powered through with pure stubbornness," Hajime added with a self-deprecating shrug. He then started recalling his Cross Bits. They'd bought enough time.

Sensing Shizuku's gaze on him, Hajime got to his feet and leaned against the wall, folding his arms. He then faced Shizuku properly and told her the words she wanted to hear most, though of course he didn't know that.

"I'll be watching over you."

"Ah..."

"You can keep trying as many times as it takes to win. As long as I'm here, you won't die at least. I won't let you. Don't worry."

“And that’s why I fell for you...” Shizuku muttered those words so quietly even she didn’t hear them. Naturally, neither did Hajime. But Shizuku couldn’t help but wonder what kind of expression he might have made if he had. *Knowing him, he’d probably just look annoyed...* Shizuku thought to herself with a grin.

This must have been how Aiko-sensei and Liliana felt too. Something’s gotta be wrong with us if we all fell for the same taciturn, insensitive guy... Shizuku got to her feet, her body feeling lighter than ever before. She then hugged the black katana Hajime had given her close to her chest. After taking a moment to prepare herself, she turned to her copy, her expression cool and aloof.

As she stared down her nemesis, Shizuku asked Hajime quietly, without turning around, “You promise you’ll watch over me?”

“Yeah.”

“And if the time comes, protect me?”

“Yeah.”

“And if I feel like I can’t go on anymore, you’ll help me get back on my feet?”

“Guess I’ll have to.”

Shizuku smiled faintly. Spring had come, and it was time for the ice to thaw. Her broken spirit reignited, bright and soft as the sun, but as unyielding as iron.

Shizuku took a deep breath. Her chest welled up with emotions she couldn’t express in words. So she trusted the tone of her voice to express them instead and simply said, “I’ll be going then.”

“Go for it. I’ll be waiting.”

Shizuku’s wounds had been healed, but she was still dizzy from blood loss. Honestly, she was having a hard time standing. Despite that, her footsteps were far surer than they’d been when she’d first stepped into this room. She faced off against her copy. It was waiting silently for her, its katana sheathed.

“I can’t believe you’d start flirting in front of the enemy. I have to say, you’ve got some nerve.”

“Really? Well, you can thank Nagumo-kun for that. Also, we weren’t flirting.

Though I do wish we were.”

“Oh my, so you’re going to betray your best friend after all? Not only that, you’re going to turn her into your rival...”

“Let’s stop the pointless chitchat. There’s no point in asking the same questions over and over. I’m going to get out of this alive and see Kaori again. Once I do, I can figure out where I want to go from there.”

“.....”

Seeing how unfazed Shizuku was, her copy fell silent. At the same time, it noticed its power was waning, meaning Shizuku had finally accepted the feelings she’d tried to lock away.

“Maybe we’ll fight, maybe Kaori’ll be shocked speechless. Maybe she’ll hate me. But—”

Actually, how would things go? After all, Kaori’s the one who kept telling me to be more selfish. She’s the one who said she’d love nothing more than to see me be more honest with myself. Now that I think about it, I thought I was protecting her this whole time, but maybe she was the one protecting me. She really did have the right idea about who should play what roles back during that play.

Shizuku’s heart felt lighter as she remembered her best friend’s gentle smile. She could almost feel Kaori pushing her forward.

“I won’t give up. I’ll find a way to get the things I want. Even if I have to fight you over and over, I won’t give up.”

Shizuku wouldn’t compromise anymore. She’d treasure her best friend’s feelings *and* her own. But in order to do that—

“In the end, that means you’ll have to keep fighting.”

“That’s right,” Shizuku said with a nod, “But you know,” she added with an awkward smile, “It’s true that I suppressed parts of myself this whole time, but those experiences taught me a lot. And I gained so many irreplaceable things because of it.”

If she’d chosen not to fight at all, if she’d chosen to become nothing more

than a sheltered princess, she wouldn't be where she was now. Of course, she still admired that kind of lifestyle. But she didn't need it anymore. She wouldn't doubt herself again. After all—

“Even if I have to keep fighting, there's someone way stronger than me who'll protect me.”

Shizuku's copy sighed in exasperation and shook its head.

“You know he's only protecting you because you're an important friend of Kaori's, right? That's all.”

“That's fine. For now, anyway.”

Shizuku breathed out and dropped into an laido stance.

“I don't have much strength left, so I'm going to bet it all on this one attack. Let's see if you can withstand it.”

Unlike when she'd been fighting earlier, Shizuku's spirit was as sharp as her blade. But it was also true that she only had enough physical and mental strength left for one big attack. It was an all-or-nothing gamble.

“Fufu. I applaud your determination. But I have to say, he always finds a way to show up at just the right time. He's there when you need him, where you need him... I thought people like him only existed in fairy tales.”

The copy smiled bitterly. Indeed, Hajime had shown up at just the right time and had said all the right things to get Shizuku back on her feet again. Since the copy was a mirror of Shizuku's own heart, those thoughts were ones Shizuku herself had pondered.

The copy dropped into a stance identical to Shizuku's and prepared to draw its katana. Both of them prepared to unleash their final attacks. Their willpower alone was sharp enough to cut through each other. The cold air trembled between them.

Shizuku's heart felt as calm and still as a spring in the deep forest. The reassuring presence behind her filled her with strength. She knew Hajime was watching over her. And she believed that even if the worst were to happen, he'd protect her. Shizuku and her copy dashed forward simultaneously.

“Hmph!”

“Haaaah!”

Shizuku and her copy clashed, their ponytails splaying out behind them. This time there were no sparks, no sounds of metal hitting metal. The two passed each other quietly and stood there with their backs to each other.

A second passed. There was a faint whoosh, and Shizuku’s ponytail came undone. Her hair tie fluttered to the ground in two pieces. Proof that her copy had cut it. However, it was Shizuku who still had the strength left to return her katana to her scabbard. Her hilt made a satisfying clink as it hit the sheath.

At the same time, her copy staggered. The top half of its body slid off its bottom half, and it vanished in a puff of light. As it faded away, Shizuku could have sworn it smiled in satisfaction.

“Ah...”

A second later Shizuku’s legs gave out underneath her. Now that the adrenaline rush was gone, she no longer had the strength left to stand. But she never hit the ground.

“Nice job. Your swordsmanship’s as amazing as always.”

“Nagumo-kun... Fufu, it’s fine if you fall for me, you know?”

“In your dreams.”

“Alas, what a shame.”

Hajime gently laid Shizuku onto the ground. As the two were joking around, a third passageway, separate from the ones Shizuku and Hajime had come from, appeared in the wall.

“Yaegashi, can you walk?”

“It seems not. I think I need to rest for a bit. Actually, that won’t fix the blood loss, so unless you’ve got restoration magic handy, I don’t think I’ll be able to move for a while...”

Shizuku stroked her chin thoughtfully, then reached out to Hajime with both arms.

“So if you would be so kind, Nagumo-kun.”

“Huh?”

“Carry me.”

“Yaegashi, is it just me or did your personality change? I feel like you suddenly got a lot more shameless.”

Hajime hadn’t expected Shizuku of all people to ask to be carried. Giggling, she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes.

“I’ve decided to be more honest with myself. Anyway, don’t we need to hurry and meet up with the others? Oh, I know. If you don’t want to carry me, how about making an artifact imbued with restoration magic? I know the katana you gave me is enchanted with a little, but it’s not enough.”

Confused by Shizuku’s sudden change, Hajime nevertheless decided to comply with Shizuku’s request. There was no telling what was going on with Yue and the others, so it was probably best to hurry. As he started pulling materials out of his Treasure Trove, Shizuku tacked on another request.

“Could you make it a hair ornament? As you can see, my hair tie’s snapped. Oh, and make it cute. I want something like those crystals you gave Yue and the others.”

“You sure are demanding. I know I said you needed to loosen up, but I wasn’t expecting this.”

Well I guess it can be her reward for clearing the trial. Hajime thought absently to himself and started transmuting.

Red sparks ran down his arms, and he fashioned a hair clip for Shizuku. The design on the clip was one of numerous leaves dancing gently in the morning mist. He’d crafted it out of a pearl-like ore that had a high affinity to magic, so the clip glowed faintly in the room’s dim light.

“It’s so pretty...”

“There you go. Good enough, right? Put it on and let’s go.”

Hajime had made the hair clip in under a minute and it was by no means a masterpiece, but Shizuku was captivated by it. He threw it carelessly to her and

got to his feet. Holding in the desire to stare at it forever, Shizuku bunched her hair up into a ponytail and put the hairclip on.

“What do you think?”

Blushing slightly, she looked up at Hajime. *Okay, yeah, there’s definitely something strange about how Yaegashi’s acting.*

“It’s nowhere near as good as actual restoration magic, but it should be able to heal you.”

“That’s not what I was asking.”

Of course, Hajime knew what she was actually asking. But right now, he was getting a dangerous sense of déjà vu. Shizuku looked exactly like how Aiko had back when he’d saved her from the church. His instincts were screaming at him to change the topic fast.

Sighing at Hajime’s feigned denseness, Shizuku shrugged her shoulders and once again reached out to Hajime with both arms. It was a silent appeal to be carried. One way or another, she’d get Hajime to carry her. And since it was a fact that she couldn’t move for a while at least, Hajime knew he had to oblige. Sighing, he pulled a gravity stone out of his Treasure Trove.

“If you try to carry me on that cross one more time, the moment we get out of here I’m telling everyone about your middle school years.”

Shizuku cut him off. Of course Hajime knew without asking what part of his middle school years Shizuku was referring to. She looked from his hair, to his eyepatch, to his prosthetic arm.

“.....”

Hajime silently returned the gravity stones to his Treasure Trove. For a moment, he entertained the idea of carrying her on a bunny-shaped gravity stone or something cute like that, but he discarded the notion when he saw Shizuku’s glare. There was only one answer that didn’t end in him dying of embarrassment later.

He had a bad feeling about Shizuku’s newfound selfishness, but there was no point in just standing around doing nothing.

She's got a lot scarier mental attacks than this labyrinth... Sighing, Hajime turned his back to Shizuku and squatted down. It was obvious he was doing this reluctantly.

"Mrr, I wanted to be princess-carried... but oh well."

Hajime decided it was best not to say anything and lifted Shizuku onto his back. He did his utmost to not think about the two soft mounds pressing against him.

However, Shizuku wrapped her arms around Hajime and stuck even closer to him. Hajime silently got to his feet and started walking down the new passageway that had appeared.

Chances were another one of his comrades was waiting for him at the other end. He was hoping it would be Kaori, so she could take this transformed Shizuku off his hands.

As he walked, he heard a whisper in his ear. But it wasn't the labyrinth this time. The voice was soft and sweet. And he could feel the heat of Shizuku's breath on his ear. She'd laid her head on his shoulders and was whispering to him.

"Hey, Nagumo-kun."

"Hm? What's up?"

"Did you hear what I was saying to my copy?"

"Nope. You were too far away, and you weren't talking that loudly."

Hajime shook his head.

"I see..." Shizuku murmured. She lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then suddenly thrust her hand out. She turned it around, showing her palm to Hajime.

"This hand's full of calluses, right? It was like that before too, but I got a lot of new ones after coming to Tortus."

Hajime had no idea where Shizuku was trying to go with this, and he looked at her hand with a puzzled expression.

“I bet you don’t think it’s a girl’s hand either, huh?”

Her voice was like a small bird’s. She wasn’t embarrassed, but she seemed afraid to hear Hajime’s answer. Still, she’d worked up her courage and asked.

Hajime took a good look at Shizuku’s hand. As she’d said, the skin on her palm was thick and hard. It was proof she’d spent years upon years perfecting her swordsmanship.

“If a soft, unblemished hand is a ‘girl’s hand,’ then yeah, I guess it’s not.”

“.....”

“But I prefer a hand like this.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s a lot prettier than a hand that can’t hold anything heavier than a pair of chopsticks.”

“.....”

Shizuku suddenly felt embarrassed and she balled her hand into a fist to hide her palm. At the same time, she hugged Hajime tighter.

“Nagumo-kun, thanks for coming to save me.”

“It wasn’t on purpose. Things just ended up that way.”

“Fufu, my copy said something like that too. How you’re like a hero from a fairy tale. Back when you saved us in Orcus, and in the palace, you always showed up at just the right time. Are you sure you’re not doing it on purpose?”

“Don’t be stupid. Every time something happens, I just barely make it in time... Hell, in Kaori’s case it was actually too late. Anyway, it’s bad for my heart, so really I’d rather make it before things get that bad rather than just on time.”

Though Hajime always appeared overwhelmingly strong and in control of the situation, in truth he was just desperately running around trying to keep things from falling apart. At every major conflict, if he’d made even a single misstep, he would have ended up losing everything.

If showing up at the last minute every time is what makes a hero, then I don’t

wanna be one. Seeing Hajime's annoyed expression, Shizuku giggled.

"Personally, I think it's cool. You always come in at the last minute and gallantly save the heroine. You know, I actually really like girly things."

"Yeah, I know. Kaori told me all about you."

After Kaori had parted with Kouki's party in Horaud, she'd spent an entire day happily telling Hajime about her best friend. Honestly, Shizuku kind of wished Kaori would respect her privacy more, but Kaori's desire to tell the world about Shizuku was hard to hold back.

"Sheesh, that girl..." Shizuku muttered to herself.

"Well, that's how it is. I'd much rather have been playing house than practicing swordsmanship as a kid, and I always wanted to be the princess who got protected by the cool knight. When we were sent to our ideal dream worlds back in Haltina's labyrinth, that's what I dreamed about."

Of course, she was too embarrassed to tell Hajime who the knight had been in her dream. Blushing, she quickly moved on from that topic.

"But even I thought it was too cringy to tell people."

"Yeah, that is pretty cringy."

"This is where you're supposed to be tactful," she said with a pout before continuing, "Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, I'm really grateful to you for always showing up to save me when I'm in a pinch, Nagumo-kun. When you said you'd watch over me and make sure I don't die, I was really happy."

"You're exaggerating. Besides, the reason I can't let you die, Yaegashi, is—"

"Because if I died, Kaori would be sad, right? I know."

Shizuku finished Hajime's sentence for him. Her tone wasn't self-deprecatory, though. In fact, it was surprisingly light.

After all, she knew it was true. If she died, Kaori would be devastated. She'd probably have ended up the same way Shizuku had when Kaori died.

Naturally, that was something Hajime would never allow. He would do everything in his power to protect Kaori's happiness. That was why he hadn't

even hesitated to give Shizuku one of his precious Ambrosia vials, of which he'd only had five left.

However, Hajime couldn't say with confidence that he'd saved Shizuku solely for Kaori's sake.

The things he'd gained during his journey, and the future he was working toward had softened his heart. Furthermore, his journey was nearing its end. On top of that, this labyrinth had reminded him of his true feelings. There was no doubt that he was a monster. And he didn't regret becoming one. Even now, he had no intention of playing the hero and saving people he didn't know.

However, he knew now that his old way of living was flawed. Whether someone was an enemy or not, whether a course of action was rational or not, whether something was needed or not, the world wasn't so simple that it could be split into those two categories. Nor would Hajime find happiness if he simply abandoned everything and everyone that didn't benefit him.

He might not have been consciously aware of it at the time, but that was why he'd allowed Kouki and the others to join him. It was also why he'd decided to leave Liliana powerful artifacts to protect her, and told Shizuku he wouldn't abandon her.

And now that he'd become aware of the changes he was undergoing, he didn't feel like lying to Shizuku. *I guess being honest about my feelings isn't so bad once in a while. Besides, if I clam up here... I'll look like a tsundere. And the last thing I want is people thinking I'm a tsundere. No one likes dude tsunderes anyway.*

Thus, Hajime decided to correct Shizuku.

"It's true that it was partly for Kaori's sake, but not completely. I'd say it was only 80% for her."

Shizuku blinked in surprise. For a second, she didn't comprehend what Hajime was saying, but then it hit her. She always had been quick on the uptake. Her chest grew hot, and she felt a faint glimmer of hope. If the reason Hajime had saved her was only 80% for Kaori's sake, that meant the remaining 20% was—

"So what about the other 20%?"

“You’re a good person, Yaegashi. So I’m not going to abandon you.”

“.....”

It wasn’t the nicest way of putting things, but Shizuku understood. She understood completely. Somewhere inside Hajime’s heart, Shizuku existed too. She wasn’t just another random person to him, but someone he’d be willing to save.

Squealing to herself, Shizuku buried her face in the nape of Hajime’s neck. She was blushing to the tips of her ears. Of course Hajime grumbled about how she was tickling him, which killed the mood. So in retaliation, Shizuku whispered, “Nagumo-kun, I want to hurry up and meet Kaori. Not just her, but Yue, Shea, and Tio too. And then—”

Shizuku paused for a moment to gather her courage. In order to hide her embarrassment, she said it as casually as possible.

“I’ll tell them that I fell in love with you, Nagumo-kun. I don’t know how they’ll react, but I’ve been thinking I should be more honest with myself.”

“I see. Then I guess we better meet up with them soon so... Hold on a second Yaegashi, what did you just—”

Hajime was so surprised he came to a halt, but before he could finish his question Shizuku whispered, “Nagumo-kun, I’m tired. I’m going to close my eyes for a bit so... protect me... okay?”

The soft sound of Shizuku’s breathing reached Hajime’s ears. It appeared she’d fallen asleep. Dropping a bombshell of a confession and then just leaving was a strategy reminiscent of a certain hotheaded healer. *They really are best friends, huh?*

“.....”

Hajime frowned, furrowing his brows. He opened his mouth to say something, but when he turned around and saw Shizuku’s expression, he thought better of it. Sighing, he just smiled wryly to himself and resumed walking. Shizuku cracked open an eyelid and stealthily observed Hajime.

Does he know I’m just faking it? Feeling emboldened, Shizuku decided to act a

little more selfish. She wanted to tease Hajime, since he always looked so unfazed. And so, just as Yue often did to him, she playfully bit his neck.

“Whoa!? What the heck are you doing, Yaegashi...!? Yaegashi?”

Shizuku said nothing. After all, she was supposed to be asleep. She’d just accidentally bit him in her sleep. She kept repeating that to herself and did her best to feign sleep.

After a few seconds, Hajime muttered, “You’re hopeless...” and sighed to himself.

Since Shizuku had her eyes shut, she couldn’t look at Hajime’s expression. But she had no trouble imagining it. After all, she’d seen his exasperated face so many times before. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t stop herself from grinning. But even so, she continued feigning sleep. *Wait for me, Kaori. I’m going to show you just how selfish I can be.* For the first time in her life, Shizuku felt free. She hugged Hajime just a little harder, savoring the feeling.



Extra Chapter: Girls' Talk: Midnight Edition

A canopy of stars glittered overhead. The night sky was perfectly clear, without a cloud in sight. The only noises were the buzzing of insects and the sound of wind rustling through grass. On such a perfect night, two corpses lay on the ground.

"Shizushizu, are you alive?"

"I'm alive..."

It seemed they weren't quite corpses. The two figures that resembled squashed frogs were Shizuku and Suzu. They rolled over onto their backs and spreads their legs and arms apart. The cool night air filled their lungs, soothing their feverish bodies. Looking up at the dazzling starry sky, they let out simultaneous sighs.

"Tomorrow's the day."

"That it is. I'm glad we managed to get used to them in time."

Shizuku and Suzu were talking about the upgraded artifacts Hajime had made for them after clearing Haltina's Labyrinth. They'd spent the day familiarizing themselves with them. While their new artifacts had tons of new abilities and were exponentially more powerful than their old versions, Shizuku and the others needed to practice with them to use them properly.

Hajime had already brought the party a few hours flight away from the Schnee Snow Fields. Tomorrow they would descend, and there would be no resting until they cleared the final labyrinth, the Frost Caverns.

Shizuku and Suzu had managed to get accustomed to their artifacts just in time. They were completely drained of mana and drenched in sweat, but the two of them were proud of how far they'd gotten.

As they were basking in their success, they heard footsteps approaching them.

“Shizuku-chan, Suzu-chan, well done!”

That excited voice could only belong to Kaori. Looking over, Shizuku saw that even though Kaori had transferred her soul into the body of Noint, she was still wearing the same loose white pajamas. Behind her stood Yue, Shea, and Tio. They, too, were all in their pajamas. Among them, only Tio was wearing a yukata. Despite the fact that yukatas weren't supposed to show much skin, somehow Tio's breasts and thighs were easily visible. *Why does she always dress so erotically?* Suzu thought idly to herself.

“Here you go, you two. Wipe that sweat off.”

“Thank you, Kaori.”

“Thanks, Kaorin.”

Shizuku and Suzu gratefully accepted the towels Kaori held out to them and wiped themselves down. Tio looked down at them worriedly and said, “Midnight has passed. Are you sure you two aren't overworking yourselves?”

“Yeah, make sure to take care of yourselves, guys. Anyway, do you want a midnight snack? If you don't eat up after a workout, you won't get any stronger!”

Shea held out a tray piled high with fresh bread and warm soup. As Shizuku and Suzu inhaled the scent of the hearty vegetable soup, one of their stomachs growled.

“Ahaha, you sure sound hungry, Suzu-san.”

Suzu glared at Shea.

“How come you assumed it was my stomach that growled, Sheashea? Because it wasn't me.”

Everyone's gazes swiveled to the only other person it could have been.

“D-Don't look at me...” Shizuku said weakly. It seemed she was the hungry one. She hurriedly wrapped her ponytail around her face to hide her embarrassment.

The others smiled at her.

“Oh yeah, where are Kouki-kun and Ryutarou-kun?”

Kaori changed the topic in order to spare her best friend any further embarrassment. Thankful, Shizuku undid her ponytail guard.

“They already went to bed. As usual, Ryutarou practiced so hard he collapsed. And Kouki’s Holy Sword was way more efficient than he thought it would be, so he ran out of mana early.”

“A-Are they going to be okay?”

“Yep. In the end, they managed to master their artifacts too. They’ll probably make any final adjustments tomorrow morning before we land.”

“Oh, that’s good. But what do we do now? There’s enough food for all of you.”

Kaori had expected two growing boys to eat a lot, so she’d made about seven servings worth of food.

“Why don’t we all eat together then? We can have a girls-only midnight snack party. That sounds like fun, right?”

Shea’s bunny ears waved back and forth excitedly.

“Mmm... Hajime went to sleep because he wants to rest up for tomorrow, so why not.”

Yue nodded in agreement, and no one else raised any objections. And so, the girls-only midnight snack party began. Shizuku and Suzu relaxed the moment they drank the delicious soup. Kaori smiled, glad they were enjoying her food.

“I thought it was Shea who made this but... this tastes like Kaori’s cooking. Thank you, Kaori.”

“Ehehe, I knew you’d be able to tell, Shizuku-chan.”

Kaori blushed a little, and Shizuku replied with a gentle smile, “But of course.”

“You two are really close, Shizuku-san, Kaori-san.”

Kaori hugged Shizuku and said proudly, “Yep!” She then grinned and shot Yue a suggestive glance.

“What do you sound so happy about, Shirasucky Kaoridiot?”

“What kind of nickname is that!?”

Yue harrumphed. Annoyed by how proudly Kaori was showing Shizuku off, she hugged Shea and said, “But Shizuku doesn’t have these wonderful bunny ears...”

Yue grinned as if to say her best friend was better than Kaori’s best friend.

“Y-Yeah, well, Shizuku-chan has this ponytail!”

“Hmph... That can’t beat these ears’ softness.”

“Oh yeah? Well, Shizuku-chan’s boobs are super soft!”

“What are you saying, Kaoriiiiii!?” Shizuku shouted.

Just as a one-upping war about whose best friend was the greatest was about to begin, Suzu interjected, “It must be nice to have a best friend. Best friends are wonderful. I used to have one too. Oh, whoops, I guess she never even considered me a friend... Hahaha...”

Everyone turned to Suzu. The group’s usual mood maker was looking down with eyes like a dead fish. Kaori edged away from Shizuku while Yue released Shea.

“S-Suzu. How do your fans feel? Are they comfortable to use?”

Masochism that severe wasn’t something even Tio was willing to make fun of, so instead, she changed the topic. Yue and the others flashed her a thumbs-up.

“Oh, they work just fine, Tio-san. This is the first time I’ve ever used a folding fan, so it feels kind of high-class.”

The dark aura surrounding Suzu receded, and she returned to her normal self. Careful not to touch on any sore spots, Shizuku added, “Well, fans are supposed to be graceful and elegant tools. When you’re channeling your mana through them, it really looks like you’re dancing, Suzu.”

“Sh-Shizushizu, you’re making me blush. There’s no way I look that cool. Besides, it’s all thanks to Nagumo-kun’s amazing artifact. Remember, he said he added an option to make my mana flow out like rays of light.”

As always, Hajime was a fan of adding pointless aesthetic touches to the

things he made. Shizuku smiled teasingly and said, “Fufu, sorry. I just couldn’t say that in front of Kouki, so it slipped it out here.”

Kaori cocked her head at that.

“Why couldn’t you say it in front of Kouki-kun?”

Shit. Shizuku pulled a face. She hadn’t meant to say that around Kaori. Shizuku exchanged glances with Suzu, then tried to think of how to smooth this over. She knew Kaori wouldn’t let the matter rest until she got an answer.

“Well... you know how Kouki has a bit of a complex regarding Nagumo-kun? But we still need his artifacts to stand a chance, so...”

“Ahaha, so if Shizushizu praised Nagumo-kun’s artifact’s in front of him, he’d get all sulky, that’s all.”

That was indeed the case. Suzu and the others were glad for the improved weapons Hajime had given them. But Kouki felt like accepting charity from Hajime undermined his own position, since he was trying to prove that his way of thinking was more correct than Hajime’s. Kaori smiled uneasily, while Yue sighed, and Tio muttered, “What a hopeless boy he is...”

Meanwhile, Shea cocked her head and asked inquisitively, “Shizuku-san, do you love him?”

“Come again?”

That was the last question Shizuku had been expecting.

“I mean, I’ve been wondering for a while now. Like, you’re always looking out for Kouki-san, Shizuku-san. And I feel like you tolerate him more than the rest of us.”

“Oh, come to think of it that has been on my mind as well. When you obtained evolution magic, it was only Kouki who appeared distraught. And so, you started acting rather considerate toward him, did you not?”

“Mmm... You’re far too considerate of someone who can’t even be happy for his friends when they achieve something. Are losers like him your type?”

Shizuku firmly denied Yue’s question, but then she shrugged her shoulders and said with a troubled smile, “I guess it’s because he’s a relative, so I can’t just

abandon him.”

Everyone other than Kaori looked at Shizuku in confusion. They knew that Shizuku and Kouki were childhood friends, but they hadn’t thought they were related.

“Shizuku-chan doesn’t mean that literally. It’s because Kouki-kun’s a student of the Yaegashi style. All disciples of the Yaegashi style are treated like family by the dojo.”

The Yaegashi Dojo had been around for generations. They taught proper sword techniques too, so security firms and police organizations often recruited from the dojo’s ranks. The dojo was also famous among martial arts circles. While gaining entry into the Yaegashi Dojo was difficult, those who managed to become formal disciples were treated the same as family.

“Family never abandons family. In fact, family is only family because they never abandon each other.”

That was the most important precept of the Yaegashi style, and Shizuku’s grandfather’s, Shuuzou’s, favorite saying. In truth, no matter how far past disciples had strayed from the path, or what trouble they’d gotten themselves into, the Yaegashi Dojo had never abandoned them. The bonds between fellow practitioners of the Yaegashi style ran deep. And since Shizuku had grown up watching her grandfather, father, and mother embody those ideals, she had internalized them as well.

Incidentally, the reason Kouki had ended up a disciple at the Yaegashi Dojo was because his mother had been helped out of a tight spot by Shuuzou before.

“So yeah, he’s a troublesome guy, but I can’t just abandon him. How do I put this... If I had to say, he’s more like a troublesome little brother than anything.”

The fact that Shizuku saw someone her own age as a “little brother” just proved how little chance Kouki had with her. Yue and the others felt a little sorry for him. Of course, it was often said that people raised together like siblings rarely developed romantic feelings for each other, but it was clear that wasn’t the case for Kouki at least. Shea’s bunny ears flopped up and down and her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“So you don’t see him as a potential boyfriend at all?”

It was finally time for the main event of the night. Shizuku squirmed uncomfortably, so Suzu stopped munching on the vegetables in her soup long enough to say, “There used to be a lot of rumors. Shizushizu and Kaorin were always with Kouki-kun, and he obviously treated them better than everyone else.”

“That’s certainly true. Well, thanks to that other guys stopped trying to confess, since they all thought they didn’t stand a chance against Kouki. Guess the rumors were a good thing in the end.”

So you at least considered dating him! Shea thought to herself. Now Yue and Tio looked interested as well. Since Yue and the others were all in love with Hajime, even if they wanted to talk about love, they all just ended up talking about Hajime instead. That was why hearing about the love lives of other people was a refreshing change. But Shizuku smiled bitterly and shook her head.

“To be honest, I’m not really that fond of Kouki.”

“What!?”

Suzu looked just as surprised as Yue and the others. Not only had they never seen Shizuku make an expression like that, but they also hadn’t expected her to claim she disliked her childhood friend. Hungry for details, they leaned closer to Shizuku. Kaori was the only one who gave Shizuku a worried look.

“Kouki’s always been popular with girls,” Shizuku finally said. She thought back to those painful days when all the other girls had ostracized her. Because of their youth, the other girls had been merciless in their bullying.

“Back then, I wasn’t very girly at all, so whenever other people saw me together with Kouki, they got jealous.”

Shizuku’s tone and expression were light. But she could feel those dark memories banging at the cage she’d built around her heart, and she had to compose herself for a second before she could keep going.

“To make things worse, I was really awkward around people, so I didn’t know what to do...”

“So you would have preferred to cut ties with Kouki, but because he was family you could not bring yourself to abandon him?”

Tio cut to the heart of the matter, which made Shizuku shrug.

“What? Shouldn’t Kouki-san have done something to help? You guys were friends, right?”

Of course Kouki had tried to help. He’d asked the girls who were jealous of Shizuku to be friends with her. But naturally, that had only made things worse. Rather than tell people that though, Shizuku turned to Kaori with a smile and said, “Kaori was the one who saved me.”

“Shizuku-chan...”

Shizuku still remembered those times clear as day. She’d often been put in the same class as Kaori, so she’d known about her before they first spoke.

At first, Shizuku had been jealous of Kaori. She’d been the kind of girl Shizuku had always wanted to be. Completely different from the girl everyone always mistook for a boy.

Even though they’d barely talked, Shizuku could never bring herself to look directly at Kaori. Nor could Shizuku bring herself to open up to her. Anytime Kaori was close by, anytime someone praised Kaori, Shizuku burned with jealousy. And she hated herself for that, so even though she was always in the same class as Kaori, Shizuku avoided her. However, Kaori cared nothing for the walls Shizuku put up around herself. It was in her nature to break those down, after all.

“So pretty...”

That was the first thing Kaori had said to Shizuku. She’d squatted down next to Shizuku’s desk, put her fingers on it, and looked up at her.

At first, Shizuku had thought Kaori was making fun of her. Thinking that even this princess was going to bully her, Shizuku had despaired. However, Shizuku soon learned the hard way that Kaori was the kind of girl who always meant what she said, and did what she meant.

“She came to see me every day after that. I’d grown distrustful of people by

then, so I stubbornly ignored Kaori at first but... she just kept coming day after day after day. She'd say stuff like, 'Hey, Shizuku-chan look at this! Oh, is it okay if I call you Shizuku-chan?' and look up at me with those big puppy-dog eyes. And eventually, I just gave up."

"B-But you really were pretty, Shizuku-chan! That was the first time I'd ever seen such a pretty girl!"

Blushing, Kaori covered her face and squirmed. Shizuku chuckled softly, then gently patted Kaori's head.

"I didn't tell you back then but... I was really happy you talked to me. So happy I cried when I got back to my room. You know, when the other girls tried to tell Kaori how she should act around me, she just said 'Why? Why should I do that?'"

Kaori had stayed by Shizuku's side, ignoring all obstacles people threw at her. No matter how much the other girls pleaded, Kaori hadn't listened. It was possible Kaori had instinctively realized that Shizuku was in pain, which was why she'd worked so hard to stay by Shizuku's side. She'd wanted to heal Shizuku.

"This foolishly straightforward girl gave me strength. And from there, I began to change."

Shizuku learned that lamenting her situation wouldn't solve anything. She wanted to become the kind of person that stood up for what she believed in, like Kaori. And so, Shizuku started training herself in earnest. She didn't want to return malice with malice, but she had no intention of taking others' malice lying down, either. She trained in order to build up her self-confidence, so that she could hold her head high and do what she wanted without others interfering.

"Oh yeah, it was Kaori's fault that I started growing out my hair."

"Why're you making it sound like a bad thing!?"

Shizuku comforted Kaori, then turned to Yue and the others, who were waiting for the rest of the story.

"Kaori told me 'Shizuku-chan, you'd look good with long hair!' Of course, my grandfather had told me to keep my hair short since I was practicing

swordsmanship, so I told her I couldn't grow it out, but..."

As expected, Kaori had barged into the Yaegashi Dojo to give Shizuku's grandfather a piece of her mind. Shizuku had desperately tried to stop her, but Kaori had shaken her off and told Shizuku's grandfather, the same man police nationwide respected, that he was wrong. In front of all his pupils, she'd told him how pretty Shizuku was, and that she should be allowed to grow out her hair.

In the end, Shizuku's grandfather, who was famous for never smiling, had burst out laughing and accepted Kaori as an honorary member of the Yaegashi Dojo. To this day, the dojo's disciples spoke of her legendary entrance.

Back in the present though, Kaori covered her face again and said, "D-Don't bring that back up. I was young and foolish back then."

"Don't worry... You haven't changed at all since then. Shirafucky Kaoridiot."

Kaori replied to Yue's gentle smile with a full-power punch. However, Tio jumped in the way to block it and started moaning in pleasure.

"Anyway, thanks to Kaori, I was able to take a step back and appraise Kouki from a more objective standpoint."

Even at the time, Kouki was still obsessed with justice. He wandered the town, helping anyone and everyone he could find. He never hesitated to throw himself into the middle of a quarrel, and strangely enough, problems and people in need started coming to him.

He never doubted that people were fundamentally good, and Kouki himself didn't have an evil bone in his body. Everything he did, he did for the sake of others. He was always looking straight forward, and he always saved people with style. But because of how bright he shone, he never realized how long the shadows he cast were.

He really was a troublesome guy. Which was why—

"I never really saw Kouki as boyfriend material. For better or worse, I know him too well. That's why he's basically family to me."

Yue and the others nodded in understanding, their curiosity sated. However,

this was a rare chance to talk about love. They didn't want the conversation to end there.

"So then, is there someone you do have a crush on, Shizuku-san?"

"Sh-Shea, don't you think you're being a little too forward..."

Unfortunately, the only people around Shea were fellow Hajime enthusiasts and a pervert. And now that her love had been rewarded, Shea was interested in hearing about the love stories of others. Her bunny ears bounced back and forth, and her eyes glimmered with excitement.

Shizuku wasn't sure how to answer, or that she wanted to answer at all. While she was hesitating Kaori stepped in and said, "Oh yeah, Shizuku-chan. During that last interview you did for the kendo magazine, didn't you say you preferred a guy who would protect—"

Shizuku clamped her hands over Kaori's mouth. Kaori loved talking about Shizuku so much that she had absolutely no qualms spilling all of Shizuku's secrets. Unfortunately, Shizuku had reacted too late, and now the other girls were staring at her like vultures.

"That's right. My type's someone like you, Kaori. Thanks for always protecting me."

"Hweh?" Kaori gave Shizuku a confused look, and Shizuku smiled seductively, which made her start blushing again.

"U-Uh, is it just me, or are there lily flowers sprouting around Kaori-san and Shizuku-san?"

It was an optical illusion, but a very realistic one.

"May you find happiness, Lesbi Kaoridiot."

"Yueeeee, it's not like that! Also, do you have to add Kaoridiot to every nickname you come up with!?"

In an attempt to hide her embarrassment, Kaori pounced on Yue. However, Suzu quickly put a damper on the mood.

"Everyone at school knows about how close Kaorin and Shizushizu are. Come to think of it, when we were in a pinch back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, you

ran over to cover for Shizushizu, didn't you, Kaorin? You left my side to be with Shizushizu... I guess you'd rather spend your last moments with her than with me. Haha..."

"Suzu-chan!?"

Suzu's dark aura returned. The dream she'd been shown back in Haltina had probably reopened old wounds for her. In an attempt to appease Suzu, Shea made her the focus of the next topic.

"Wh-What about you, Suzu-san? What kind of guys are your type?"

Kaori and Shizuku flashed Shea a thumbs-up.

"Hmm... Anyone who's not a lolicon? Unlike Kaorin and Shizushizu, not that many people are interested in a shorty like me. The only person who ever confessed to me was this creepy old dude who lived in my neighborhood! Haha..."

"Suzu-san, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to bring up bad memories! Someone who's good at spirit magic, help me out here!"

Suzu's aura had grown so gloomy that Shea's only recourse was to rely on ancient magic. It appeared that while Suzu was normally cheerful, once she got depressed she just didn't stop.

Before anyone could cast spirit magic though, Yue muttered darkly, "Are you implying I'm short?"

She scooted over to Suzu, her expression terrifying. In truth, Suzu and Yue were about the same height and build. If Suzu claimed she was short, that was the same as claiming Yue was short. The pressure coming off of Yue's glare caused Suzu to break out of depression mode for a second.

"N-No! You're not short at all, Onee-sama!"

"Calm down, Yue! You're so scary Suzu-chan's stopped sounding like herself!"

Yue reluctantly scooted back. Both in an attempt to calm Suzu down, and because she'd been curious about it for a while, Shizuku asked, "By the way, Suzu. Why do you call Yue onee-sama?"

Plenty of other girls called Shizuku onee-sama, so she was wondering what

had prompted Suzu to do the same with Yue.

“Huh? Oh, uh, when she saved us in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, she just looked so cool that I...”

Yue scratched her nose awkwardly, feeling embarrassed.

“Oh, I totally get what you mean. Well, I don’t know about Yue, but Hajime-kun looked really cool when he saved us.”

“Yeah...”

Shizuku nodded in agreement, thinking back to how reliable Hajime had looked when he’d arrived. Even now, those memories were fresh in her mind. Shizuku remembered that moment as well as she did the first time Kaori had talked to her.

The red sparks running down the length of Hajime’s body. His fearless smile. His broad, reliable back. It had been completely unfair. Not the strength he’d shown, but the fact that he’d looked so cool.

“Shizuku-chan?”

As she returned to reality, Shizuku realized everyone was looking at her.

“Wh-What? What is it?”

Yue scooted over to Shizuku this time, her glare piercing through her.

“Tell me... What do you think of Hajime, Shizuku?”

“Huh? Nagumo-kun? Umm... why’re you asking me? Kaori has a lot more to say about him than—”

“I can’t ask Kaori... Any time I ask about the things she and Hajime did together before coming here, she just grins annoyingly.”

“Well, you do the same thing every time I try and ask about what happened down in the abyss, Yue!”

“Alright alright, that’s enough you two. Calm down.”

Shea grabbed Kaori and Yue by the scruff of their necks and pulled them apart. Meanwhile, Tio turned to Shizuku and pressed her for an answer.

“Well? What do you think of Master?”

Yue and Kaori instantly turned to Shizuku. Surprised by their light-speed reactions, Shizuku put a hand to her chin and thought. After a while, she looked back up and said, “Well my first impression of him was that he was a weirdo.”

“A weirdo!?”

The other girls asked in sync. That wasn’t the reply they’d been expecting. Even Kaori looked surprised.

“Yeah, the first thing that ran through my mind was ‘Kaori, are you sure *this* is the guy you want?’”

“You really thought that, Shizuku-chan!?”

Shizuku smiled ruefully and shrugged her shoulders.

“What else was I supposed to think? During the entrance ceremony, all the girls started squealing loud enough to break the windows when Kouki stepped up to the podium to give his speech. But Nagumo-kun slept like a log through the whole thing.”

“Ugh. B-But...”

Even now, Shizuku thought it was strange how he’d been able to sleep through all that. Two years had passed since Kaori had first seen Hajime, and in that time she’d talked Shizuku’s ear off about him. So it was only natural that Shizuku’s image of Hajime had been a little exaggerated.

And yet, the first time she’d met him he’d been sleeping through ear-splitting yells. Even more surprising, the moment the entrance ceremony had ended, he’d snapped awake as though he’d sensed it.

“For a long time after that, I still wondered why Kaori had picked him, of all people.”

Every morning, he’d reached class just before the bell, looking like an exhausted corporate slave. And then he’d just sleep through class. For lunch, he’d just slurp down a nutritional jelly pack in ten seconds. Then, the moment class ended he’d become lively again, and return home right away.

He’d possessed the uncanny ability to fall asleep and wake up almost

instantly, but other than that he seemed to be a normal kid who kept entirely to himself. But when Shizuku tried talking to him, she learned he was a cheerful guy and a surprisingly good listener.

“He was an odd guy, but he wasn’t like any other boy I’d met.”

Kaori and Suzu nodded in understanding. Everything Shizuku had pointed out was true.

“You understand, right?” Shizuku said with a smile. She then continued, “The weirdest thing about him though was that he wasn’t affected by Kaori’s charms at all.”

Since the entrance ceremony, Kaori had been the object of affection of all the guys. But even though she went out of her way to talk to Hajime, he’d just give her a troubled look and reply with as little effort as possible.

“There were times where I thought, ‘You bastard! How can you not like my cute little Kaori!?’ The weirdest thing was, he was sensitive enough to notice whenever I was glaring at him like that. He’d get all startled and start looking around. It was pretty funny to watch.”

Shizuku smiled mischievously as she reminisced about those early days. Not even two years had passed since then, but to Shizuku, they felt like the distant past. It was clear from her tone that she thought fondly of those memories.

Shizuku told them about the first time Kaori had invited Hajime to lunch, and he’d broken out in a cold sweat because of the way the rest of the class had looked at him.

About how despite sleeping through every class, he managed to get average grades across the board, so his teachers couldn’t discipline him.

About the one time Kaori had gone to the adult section of the video game store to play the game Hajime had talked about earlier, and how Hajime’s face had looked when she told him about it the next day.

About how Kaori had watched with an eagle eye, waiting for an opportunity to walk up to Hajime and talk to him, and how he’d always managed to flee from her.

About how he'd listened to Kouki's lecture to the very end, despite clearly not caring about a bit of it.

The memories surfaced one after another, weaving together in a tapestry. She talked and talked, not noticing the way Kaori and the others were looking at her. Still smiling, Shizuku moved into a much darker part of her story.

"I forget when exactly it started but... Nagumo-kun's life started to change little by little. Well, I guess it was inevitable, since Kaori was in love with him. The four of us were like celebrities in school. And because we ended up spending a lot of time with Nagumo-kun... there were people who grew jealous of him."

"Just like how it was with me..." Shizuku added quietly. She talked about how the atmosphere around Hajime began to grow colder. About how her classmates started openly scorning him. And as she talked, Kaori's expression grew dark. Guessing Kaori's thoughts, Shizuku slowly shook her head.

"I felt like I had to do something. Because I understood best of all what it was like to be ostracized like that. But even knowing what he was going through, I couldn't stop Kaori. Because I understood how Kaori felt too."

No matter how many other guys confessed to her, no matter what Kouki did to try and win her favor, Kaori had eyes only for Hajime. After two years of obsessing over him, she'd finally been able to meet him again. But no matter what she did, she wasn't able to get any closer to him. Since Hajime had been Kaori's first love, she had no experience at all. All she could do was try everything in her power to catch Hajime's attention, to make him look her way.

She was so focused on charming Hajime that she failed to notice what was going on around her. But Shizuku couldn't blame Kaori for that. At the same time, she didn't want to abandon Hajime either. Unfortunately, all she could do was apologize quietly to Hajime every time they talked. But despite all the guilt Shizuku was feeling, Hajime didn't seem all that bothered at all.

"Nagumo-kun didn't seem like he even cared! He'd always go 'Yeah, it's a real problem...' with that dopey smile of his, but he didn't really think it was a problem! Because if he had, he wouldn't have been yawning while he said it!"

He really had been an unbelievable guy. It was then that Shizuku had realized

he was strong. Despite how he looked, he'd possessed a will of iron. After that, her attitude toward Hajime changed. She didn't think he was just some weirdo anymore. He was still unlike any other guy she'd met, but now she was interested in learning more about him.

"At first, I stereotyped him. I thought he was just some unfeeling monster. I figured he could bear all the bullying because he just fundamentally didn't care about people."

In some sense, Shizuku hadn't been wrong. As a rule, Hajime hadn't had much interest in other people. But that wasn't because he was unfeeling or inhumane. After watching Kaori's interactions with him, Shizuku came to be sure of that.

The reason he'd been so unconcerned with other people was because he was so engrossed in his own interests. He'd loved them wholeheartedly, and so had devoted all his time to them. Thanks to that, he'd been able to accept the way others treated him. As long as he was able to do the things he loved, he didn't mind anything else.

Saying he was *resolved* to accept any punishment for pursuing his hobbies was a bit of an exaggeration, but that was how it seemed to Shizuku. Because no matter what happened, he was still able to say "Even so, this is what I want to do." It was that strength of his that allowed him to brush aside any hardship with a rueful smile and a troubled expression.

"It's hard to explain, but basically, that was when I understood. It was that pure, simpleminded strength of his that had captivated Kaori."

Smiling wholeheartedly, Shizuku recalled a tiny memory she had of Hajime. This was something neither Kaori, nor anyone else knew about. It had happened one day after school.

After kendo practice, Shizuku had returned to the classroom to pick up something she'd forgotten. Surprisingly, Hajime had still been there. He'd been fast asleep at his desk. It seemed he'd been so tired that not even the end of school bell had woken him.

Unable to ignore him, Shizuku had decided to wake him up. She'd called his name and started shaking him. He'd made a rather strange sound as he

regained consciousness, which had made Shizuku burst out laughing.

“Mmm? Yaegashi-san?”

“Yep, it’s me, Nagumo-kun. You were sleeping pretty soundly. Did you plan on spending the night at school?”

Still half out of it, Hajime had looked blankly at the window. When he’d seen how dark it had gotten, he’d let out another strange noise. Naturally, Shizuku had burst out laughing again.

“The teacher’s going to be coming to lock up soon. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Oh, yeah. Sounds good. Thanks for waking me up, Yaegashi-san.”

Because there was no one else in the room, Hajime hadn’t been as guarded as he usually was. Shizuku remembered she’d found that milder demeanor of his to be rather refreshing.

She’d headed into the hallway with him, wondering how such a gentle boy had come to possess such a strong will. They’d walked quietly down the hall, the beautiful rays of sunset casting long shadows behind them.

Suddenly Shizuku’s throat had gone dry, and she couldn’t think of anything to talk about. She’d started shooting Hajime covert glances, but he’d just been yawning tiredly like usual. Though she’d personally found the title embarrassing, she knew within the school she was considered the second most beautiful girl after Kaori. Both her underclassmen and even a few of her upperclassmen had taken to calling her onee-sama.

Naturally, plenty of guys were infatuated with her and whenever she talked with any of them, they’d start blushing and get nervous. It was obvious they thought she was out of their reach. Shizuku herself hadn’t really wanted all that attention. But for some reason, it had pissed her off that Hajime wasn’t the least bit flustered by talking to her.

“By the way, I’m sorry about what happened today. Kaori’s, well Kaori. But Kouki gave you that long lecture, didn’t he? He doesn’t mean anything bad by it, but...”

Unable to bear the silence, Shizuku had cast about for something to talk about, but the only thing she'd been able to come up with was the same apology she'd given Hajime dozens of times. She'd expected him to reply with the same "Don't worry about it," or "It's fine," that he always did, but to her surprise, he didn't.

"Hmm... Yeah, it's definitely weird."

"Huh?" Shizuku had asked, confused. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Hajime had gone on to explain what he meant.

"Yaegashi-san, a lot of people call you onee-sama, right?"

"Y-Yes, they do. I don't know why, though."

"Well you know, apparently there's this secret society called Soul Sisters that... Actually, forget about that for now. You know how you're always apologizing on behalf of your friends? Don't you think that's the kind of thing an older sister would do?"

"You... may have a point there."

Shizuku had been surprised. She didn't know if that applied to everyone else too, but that was at least exactly how she felt about Kouki.

Nodding to himself, Hajime had then added, "So is it normal to spend every day bowing your head to other people just because you have the personality of a responsible older sister? Because personally, I think it's weird. Like, are you really okay with things the way they are?"

"Well, I haven't really thought about it..."

But once Shizuku gave it some thought, she realized it definitely wasn't normal. Still, Kouki was like family to her, and Kaori was her best friend in the whole world. Of course, that was why she hadn't found it strange to always be looking after the two of them, but after Hajime had pointed it out, she realized how odd it was from an outside perspective.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't trying to imply it was bad or anything. It's just, uh, how do I put this..."

Unable to put what he wanted to say in words, Hajime had mumbled to

himself for a few minutes. It wasn't until they'd reached the shoe rack that Hajime had spoken again.

"Oh, I've got it. What I'm trying to say is, you don't have to be considerate of me."

"Huh?"

"You've got enough on your plate looking out for your friends, right? So you don't have to do the same for me."

Shizuku hadn't known how to respond to that. She'd looked up at him, shoes still in her hands, and he'd given her that same troubled smile he always did.

"The reason I get lectured so much is because I ignore what everyone says to me, so like, it's partially my own fault. I'd feel guilty if you apologized to me for that, Yaegashi-san."

"But that's not..."

Those words had resounded with Shizuku in a way nothing else had. But while she'd still been processing what he'd told her, he'd suddenly shouted, "Anyway, see you tomorrow, Yaegashi-san!" and dashed off without waiting for a reply.

It had all happened so fast that Shizuku hadn't been able to get a word in edgewise. She'd been about to call out to him, but then she'd spotted Kouki waiting by the school gate and realized he'd left in a hurry on purpose.



She hadn't been able to figure out if he was being considerate of her, or if he just hadn't wanted to be seen going home with her. Either way, his sudden departure had pissed Shizuku off. But at the same time, she felt as though she finally understood why Kaori had fallen for him so hard.

That had been her first one on one conversation with Hajime. It had been both unforgettable, and something Shizuku felt as though she'd needed to keep secret.

"Shizuku-chan?"

Kaori's voice brought Shizuku back to the present. It was then that she finally realized everyone was looking at her funny. It seemed she'd gotten so lost in her memories that she'd stopped talking.

Feeling as though she'd shown everyone a side of her she shouldn't have, Shizuku hurriedly tried to smooth things over. She cleared her throat, straightened her back, and locked away her feelings once more. In order to keep things the way she believed they should be.

"Anyway, now my impression of Nagumo-kun is that he's an unbelievably strong person."

After they'd been summoned, and it had turned out that both Hajime's job and his stats were painfully average, Hiyama and the others had started bullying him much worse than before. But even then, he hadn't broken.

Shizuku knew. Despite the fact that Hajime's only skill was transmutation, he'd continued to polish his skills, trying to find a way to turn his abilities into a weapon. No matter how much he'd been ridiculed, he'd just accepted it all with his usual troubled smile and continued moving forward.

Shizuku understood. The reason Hiyama and the others had bullied Hajime was because they themselves knew that they were no match for Hajime. Despite his weakness, he was strong. And despite all their strength, Hiyama and the others were weak. They couldn't accept that. They couldn't accept that he was better than them.

Shizuku had understood better than anyone else just how strong Hajime was. Because she herself had been weak. She'd been terrified of fighting in this

strange new world, but Hajime had been completely unperturbed. It was that strength of his that had encouraged Shizuku.

Yeah, he really is strong. How can you guys call him weak and incompetent? Look at him, he's not shaken at all. Even though we're in a different world, even though we have to fight to the death with monsters and demons, he's completely unfazed. How can someone like him possibly be weak? He's strong. Stronger than anyone.

"Out of everyone I know, he has the strongest heart," Shizuku said decisively. For a few minutes, no one said anything. Confused by the silence, Shizuku looked around at everyone.

I just said he was strong, why'd everyone suddenly go quiet?

Sighing, Yue gave Shizuku the same troubled look Hajime used to and scooted close to her. She looked into Shizuku's eyes and asked, "Strong enough to protect others?"

Shizuku's breath caught in her throat. But a second later she composed herself and said with a smile, "Yes. I'm sure Nagumo-kun will be able to protect Kaori."

Not even a smidgen of the feelings Shizuku had hidden inside her leaked through. She smiled, making it clear that she meant what she said, and only what she said.

Yue and the others were momentarily at a loss for words. Finally, after ruminating for a few seconds, Yue decided to lighten the mood. She turned to Kaori and said, "What a shame... I won't let that future come to pass, so Kaori will be forever alone."

"Yue!" Kaori exclaimed and pounced on her rival.

Shizuku's smile grew wider and she said, "Is it really a shame? Personally, I'm glad you're here, Yue."

"Mmm... Why?"

Yue stopped pulling on Kaori's cheek and cocked her head quizzically. Even now, Shizuku's smile was sincere.

“Because even though you’re her rival, you’re so attached to Kaori. Thank you so much for taking care of my best friend, Yue. I’ve always wanted to express my gratitude to you.”

“Mmm... Mmmmmmm... Mmm...”

“Owww!? Hey, Yue, that hurts! Stop!”

Blushing, Yue tried to hide her embarrassment by pulling on Kaori’s cheeks harder. Though there were tears of pain in Kaori’s eyes, no one pulled Yue off her. They were too busy grinning at Yue. It wasn’t every day they got to see her flustered.

Growing even redder, Yue vented her embarrassment by slapping Kaori and shouting, “Mmmm, that’s enough for tonight! This party’s oveeer!”

And so, the midnight party came to a close. Still red, Yue fled down the hallway to her room.

Shea and Suzu stayed where they were, committing Yue’s blushing face to memory, while Tio followed after Yue, grinning. Shizuku watched the whole thing from a distance, but then looked up when she felt a weight press against her back.

“Kaori? What’s up?”

Kaori was hugging her from behind.

“Shizuku-chan...”

“What?”

Kaori rested her chin on Shizuku’s shoulder and looked fondly into her best friend’s eyes. Shizuku blinked a few times, and Kaori closed her eyes.

“You know, I love you best when you’re honest with yourself, Shizuku-chan.”

Thinking Kaori was referring to what she’d just told Yue, Shizuku blushed and looked away.

“Don’t remind me. I know that was a pretty embarrassing thing to say.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Huh? Then what do you mean?”

Confused, Shizuku squinted at Kaori. Still smiling gently, Kaori hugged Shizuku. She looked like a mother comforting her child.

“I’m not telling. There’s no point unless you realize it yourself. But don’t forget what I told you. When the time comes, make sure you remember these words.”

“I don’t really get what you mean but... okay.”

Satisfied, Kaori pulled away from Shizuku. For some reason, Shizuku’s heart started pounding. She felt as though something dangerous was closing in on her. Something she knew she couldn’t look at, but was waiting right behind her.

Shizuku shook her head as if to shake off whatever was chasing her.

“Let’s go back to our room,” Kaori said with a smile, and Shizuku silently nodded.

At the time, Shizuku didn’t know. That her premonition would prove to be correct. Or that her friend’s words would end up being her salvation.

The swordswoman who was everyone’s caretaker didn’t yet know that she would soon face her true feelings.



Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up Arifureta volume 9. Hello everyone, it's your resident chuuni lover, Ryo Shirakome.

Now then, I imagine both those who've read the web novel and those who haven't have realized that this is the first Arifureta volume that's going to end up being a two-parter.

The original volume in the web serial was already two hundred thousand characters long, so I guess it was inevitable. Especially since I wanted to correct and expand on a lot of things for the published version to make it even better. Also, I have no idea how much people like the extra chapters, but I wanted to make sure to write one for this volume too. It might be selfish of me, but I really enjoy these segments where I get to explore the characters in more depth.

As long as you enjoyed this volume though, that's enough to make me happy.

Because of the nature of the final labyrinth's trial and because we're nearing the end of the series both this volume and the next one are going to focus a lot on the characters' personalities and internal conflicts.

I've gotta say though, writing about characters is a lot harder than writing battle scenes. You have no idea how many times I started pacing around my room, or rolling around in my bed, or walking in circles in my neighborhood thinking about how I wanted to portray everyone's inner conflicts. But in the end, I somehow managed to finish writing the first part of the Frost Caverns saga.

I'm really curious though, what did you readers think of this character-centric volume?

Most importantly, what did you think of Shizuku-chan? It's amazing, isn't it? She managed to get a second cover cameo before her best friend! And she looks so cool! I really hope more of you found her cute after reading this volume. I'd be really happy if you all accept this new and improved Shizuku

who's honest with herself. I pray you all do.

I'm planning on covering the rest of the cast's internal conflicts in the second half of the Frost Caverns saga. Hopefully, I'll also be able to write a little bit about what's going on with everyone else in Tortus too. I'm sorry for leaving you guys hanging for so long, but I hope you're looking forward to seeing how things develop.

Now then I'm running out of space, so I'd like to get to the acknowledgments.

Volume 4 of the manga, Volume 2 of Zero's manga, and Volume 2 of the Arifureta spinoff manga should be out by the time this volume is.

And so, I'd like to thank RoGa-sensei, Ataru Kamichi-sensei, and Misaki Mori-sensei for doing such a wonderful job with the various manga adaptations. I'd also like to thank Takayaki-sensei, my illustrator, and of course my editor, proofreader, and everyone else who helped out with the publishing process as well. Without all of you, this book wouldn't exist.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank you, my readers, for picking Arifureta up. As always, I'm eternally grateful to all of you. I hope you continue to support Arifureta going forward.

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

Nightmare Holiday

“Come to think of it, Heiligh’s capital is probably holding a festival right now,” Shizuku muttered quietly. Hajime and his friends were sitting in Fernir’s dining room and eating lunch as they sped toward the Schnee Snow Fields. Fernir was in cruise mode at the moment, so Hajime didn’t have to worry about steering the ship.

“Celebrating what? Oh, today’s the day Ehit was born, huh?”

“Yes. Lily told me the capital would still be celebrating it before we left.”

Kaori gave Shizuku a confused look and asked, “But wasn’t the church wiped out?”

“That’s precisely why she wants to hold the festival. Since Lily said it was happening, she’ll definitely make it happen one way or another. Assuming the capital doesn’t get invaded again, at least.”

While the capital was still in the middle of being rebuilt, the citizens likely wouldn’t begrudge the royal family for holding a single festival during the year. In fact, they would probably welcome a break from the reconstruction efforts.

Suzu blew on her cup of hot milk, her favorite drink, and said nostalgically, “A celebration for the birth of Ehit? I guess that’s just like how we have Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus back on Earth. It hasn’t even been a full year since we were summoned, but I’m already starting to miss Christmas.”

Kouki and the other kids from Earth looked out the window with wistful gazes, remembering the holidays they’d had back on earth. Suzu, on the other hand, simply took a sip of her milk, creating a white mustache around her lips, and added, “You know... I’ve never been on a Christmas date before.”

“Suzu?” Shizuku turned toward Suzu, her gaze questioning. But Suzu was too far down memory lane to hear Shizuku.

“The only time I ever talked to boys was when the whole class got together. I didn’t have people lining up to confess to me like Shizushizu and Kaorin.”

“S-Suzu-chan?”

“I got so jealous that one Christmas I forced Kaorin to wear one of those erotic Santa outfits and made her attempt to seduce Nagumo-kun.”

“Suzu-chan!?” Kaori had never imagined that had been the motive behind Suzu’s actions. However, Suzu was still lost in reminiscing and didn’t notice how betrayed Kaori looked. Realizing there was something strange going on with Suzu, even Hajime and the others started giving her worried looks.

“Most of the time, though, I just spent Christmases with Eri. We’d always grumble about how we got stuck with each other for Christmas and could never get boyfriends. We even baked our own Christmas cakes to eat. Oh, but I guess Eri would have preferred spending Christmas with Kouki-kun. She’d much rather hang out with you than with me,” Suzu said before turning to Kouki, who jerked slightly and averted his gaze, and stating, “Man, what am I even saying? We weren’t even really friends and here I am reminiscing like these are good memories. Hahaha.”

“S-Suzu-san! Would you like some more hot milk with honey!?” Shea interrupted Suzu with another mug of milk, her expression stiff. Everyone else gave her a thumbs-up. Ever since they’d been stuck in an idealized dream world back in Haltina’s labyrinth, Suzu had often fallen into these bouts of self-loathing. Suzu looked down at her new mug dejectedly and slowly took a few sips from it. Though she was clearly still feeling blue, at least her downward spiral had been stopped.

Sensing an opportunity to change the subject, Kaori turned to the Tortus crew and asked, “Oh yeah, Yue, how do you guys celebrate here? I haven’t heard too much about Tortus’ holidays, so I was curious about what you do on them. And have they changed from centuries ago to now?”

Tio thoughtfully put a hand on her chin for a few seconds, then said, “Our village did have a harvest festival of sorts. When we were still a nation instead of a race in exile, we also had holidays celebrating the founding of our nation and the birthdays of our rulers.”

Everyone, even Hajime, turned to Tio with renewed interest. They were all curious about what the lives of the reclusive dragonmen were like. Tio looked off in the distance and said wistfully, “In those days, even Ehit’s birthday was a grand affair. Everyone, regardless of race or country affiliation or even their status, was welcomed into the capital. It made for quite a spectacular festival.”

Hajime and the others imagined Tio running around her kingdom’s streets as a child. As one, they all smiled.

“Though, Ehit’s birthday was also the anniversary of my country’s downfall.”

Suddenly, Tio’s eyes glazed over the same way Suzu’s had. To make matters worse, Yue also said flatly, “Ehit’s birthday... was the day... I was betrayed... Ugh, my head hurts...”

Her eyes had glazed over as well.

“H-How about you, Shea!? What kind of holidays do the rabbitmen have!?”

Kaori gave Shea a pleading look. *Please save us, Shea! You’re always the cheerful one!* It was her fault the mood had grown darker, so she was trying her best to steer the topic back to something light.

“No clue. Normal rabbitmen might have a few holidays but... until I met Hajime-san, I was forced to remain hidden inside my village, so I don’t know what kinds of celebrations there are...”

Like the others, Shea’s eyes glazed over. Kaori hugged Shea tightly and shouted, “I’m so sorry, goddammit!”

Sensing that Kaori was nearing the end of her rope, Shizuku turned to Hajime in the hopes that he could save them. He could always be counted on to save them from any crisis, so Shizuku was sure he’d be able to fix this dark mood too.

“N-Nagumo-kun, what did you do for the holidays!?”

“I’d either spend them at home or if Kaori invited me out anywhere, spend them running away from hordes of jealous—”

“Forget it, just stay quiet!”

You’re the one who asked... Hajime thought with a frown.

“Now that it’s come to this, I’ll have to ask Kaori... No, wait, I can’t. She spent all of her Christmases asking Nagumo-kun out only to have him run from her...”

“Shizuku-chan... you didn’t have to mention that last part.”

Now even Kaori’s eyes had glazed over.

“Kouki... Actually, forget it. His Christmases were all hell. Whenever we were with him, girls from other schools would...”

“Sh-Shizuku? I-I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but did something happen when—”

Only Kouki was unaware of how much hardship Christmas caused the people around him every year. He was about to ask Shizuku what had gone on, but when he saw that her eyes had also glazed over, he cut himself off. Unlike the others, however, Shizuku recovered quite quickly. She stamped down on the dark memories of being chased around by girls who either wanted Kouki, or herself, and turned to Ryutarou.

“Ryutarou! You’re our only hope! Please tell us all about your wonderful holiday exploits!”

“You’re asking for way too much of me here!” Ryutarou flinched as everyone turned to face him, their eyes still resembling those of dead fish. However, he gathered his resolve, cleared his throat, and said, “There, uh, actually was this one time I successfully invited a girl out for Christmas.”

Finally, the despondent atmosphere cleared a little. Her interest piqued, Kaori asked, “I never knew that! What happened next, Ryutarou-kun!?”

“She was actually just trying to use me to get close to Kouki-kun, so when she found out it’d be just the two of us, she canceled on me.”

“Why’d you pick a story like that!?”

The mood fell once more, and Ryutarou’s eyes glazed over as he joined the group of Christmas rejects. Meanwhile, Kouki looked down at the floor, pointedly not meeting anyone’s gaze.

“I see, so you’re the only one who has fond memories of Christmas, Amanogawa. Die, you filthy normie.”

Hearing Hajime's barbed words, Kouki glared at him and said, "You're the last person who has any right to say that considering the harem you've got going."

In the end, the dark mood continued all the way through afternoon tea. Afterward, all mentions of holy holidays were banned among the party.

The Mad Synergist of the Forest

This event took place a few days before Hajime and the others set out for the Schnee Snow Fields. Four figures walked down a small road heading toward one of Verbergen's outlying settlements.

"Why does he have to do this away from the city?" Kouki grumbled.

"Yeah, why doesn't he just do it in his room?" Ryutarou added, his arms folded behind his head.

"I guess it's just a habit of his? Anyway, who cares why? I just want to know how my artifact's turning out. I can't wait to see what it's like. Oh yeah, you already got yours from Nagumo-kun, right Shizushizu?"

"Yes, I did. And I have to say, it's insane what he's done with it. You can expect yours to be just as amazing, Suzu."

Despite her words, Shizuku's expression was somewhat stiff. Suzu somehow doubted being optimistic was a good choice here. Kouki and the others were currently on their way to get their new artifacts from Hajime. After obtaining evolution magic, Hajime had constructed a temporary workshop in the outskirts of the capital and had done all of his experimenting there. He'd holed himself inside it the past few days, and today was finally the day Kouki and the others' artifacts had been completed.

The party arrived at the building that served as Hajime's temporary workshop and looked it up and down. It had clearly been transmuted, as it was a simple one-story affair made entirely of metal. Kouki walked up to the door and knocked.

"Nagumo, we're here. It cool if we come—" Kouki was interrupted by an explosion coming from inside. The hero and his comrades screamed in shock. The door burst outward and hit Kouki squarely in the face. The impact knocked

him directly backward into Ryutarou and the two of them flew back into the forest. Thanks to the fact that Kouki and Ryutarou had slowed the door's momentum, Shizuku and Suzu were able to dart out of the way before they were barreled over too.

"K-Kouki-kuuuuuun, Ryutarou-kuuuuuuuun!"

"Wh-What just happened!?"

Shizuku and Suzu's panicked screams echoed through the forest. As the dust cleared, the workshop's owner appeared nonchalantly in the doorway.

"Yo, sorry guys. Something blew up on accident. Anyway, come in."

"Like hell we're going to walk into that deathtrap!" Suzu and Shizuku said, completely in sync.

"I-I thought I was going to die there..."

"Thank god I kept up with my training. If I hadn't leveled up this much, I might have died."

Kouki and Ryutarou emerged from the depths of the forest. Their clothes looked disheveled, but they didn't seem to have suffered any serious injuries. Tears of relief spilled from Suzu's eyes and she ran over to her two comrades. Shizuku, on the other hand, rounded on Hajime.

"Hey, Nagumo-kun! What was that explosion!?"

"Oh, the self-destruct feature I installed into your artifacts malfunctioned. Haha, I never thought I'd mess up like that. Well, it's no big deal. Anyway, come in."

That sounds like a very big deal to me! Kouki and the others thought simultaneously. They now understood why Hajime had decided to put his workshop somewhere far from people. Kouki and the others timidly walked into Hajime's workshop, feeling as though they were entering a minefield. As they stepped inside, Kouki noticed his Holy Sword lying in a corner of the workshop. It was covered in soot and smoking.

"My swooooooord!"

Sounding as though he'd just found a fallen comrade on the battlefield, Kouki

rushed over to his beloved weapon. It was blinking faintly, as if imparting its dying words onto Kouki. After a few seconds, the light went out, and Kouki's sword died.

"Holy Swoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooord!"

Had this been a play, this would be the moment a haunting refrain started playing while spotlights shone down on Kouki.

"Stop exaggerating. It was just a little explosion."

"Wait, it was my sword that exploded!? Actually, how the hell did that even happen!?" Kouki bore down on Hajime, furious.

Hajime easily pinned him down and said casually, "What do you mean? I just told you I was testing the sword's self-destruct feature and it malfunctioned. Don't worry, though, only your sword's special. All of the other artifacts won't blow up by accident."

"Are you crazy!?" Kouki screamed as hugged his sword, as if indicating that he would never hand it over to Hajime again.

Ryutarou and the others shouted, "Don't add a self-destruct feature in the first place!"

"Nagumo-kun. Just to make sure, you haven't put a self-destruct feature into my katana, have you?" Shizuku timidly held her sword away from her body as she asked that.

"Don't worry."

"Th-Thank god, I knew you wouldn't—"

"It has one too."

"Get rid of it this instant!" Shizuku roared as she rapped Hajime's head with the flat of her blade.

"Why? Self-destruct features are what every craftsman dreams of making. What are you going to do if you can't blow yourself up when the time calls for it? A weapon that can't self-destruct has no artistic merit whatsoever. Why can't you plebians understand that?"

Grumbling to himself, Hajime nevertheless did as he was told and removed the self-destruct features from the four's weapons.

"Alright, let me explain all the upgrades... We'll start with Amanogawa's Holy Sword."

"What the hell did you do to it?" Kouki asked, sounding like a detective interrogating a mad scientist.

"Hmph, no need to look so afraid. Try pushing the button by the hilt."

"What button? Wait, you added a button to the handle!?"

Glaring at Hajime, Kouki reluctantly pushed the button. There was a strange sound, and pure white light enveloped the sword.

"Wh-What's this?"

"A lightsaber version of your sword. I call it Fuu."

"Fuu!? What kind of name is that!?"

Every time Kouki swung it, it made an odd buzzing noise, like an actual lightsaber. Unfortunately, there was no other magic contained in the light, so it couldn't actually cut through everything like a real lightsaber. In the end, it was a fake.

"Wh-Why did you even bother adding a feature like this?"

"Huh...? To intimidate foes, I guess?"

Who cares about the purpose? What matters is whether it's cool or not!

"Oh yeah, try pushing the button on the crossguard next."

Still dumbfounded by his fake lightsaber, Kouki did as he was told. This time currents of wind wrapped themselves around the blade and it turned invisible."

"Heh, what do you think? This time I modeled it after—"

"Don't say it Nagumo-kun! We'll get sued!"

Shizuku covered Hajime's mouth with her hands. He struggled helplessly against her while Kouki narrowed his eyes.

"Wait, what's going on? My body feels heavy..."

“Mmmpf! Yeah, because this mode forcibly drains your mana.”

“Huh!? Why!? Doesn’t that basically make it the same as—”

“Don’t you think cursed swords are... cool?” Hajime asked as smiled a carefree smile.

“Turn my sword back to normaaa!” Kouki’s shout resounded throughout the forest.

Hajime reluctantly undid his modifications and grumbled, “Now all you have is a Holy Sword that’s a few times stronger than your old Holy Sword.”

Why didn’t you just leave it at that? Kouki thought, glaring at Hajime.

Next, Hajime turned to Ryutarou and took out his new artifact. What appeared from Hajime’s Treasure Trove was a bouquet of flowers.

“N-Nagumo, I don’t even know how to react to this.”

Ryutarou’s hesitation was understandable. Another dude from his class was gifting him flowers. And it wasn’t just any dude, but the famous monster of the abyss. Kouki suddenly broke out in a cold sweat and turned to his best friend.

“Just take it. And pretend to look happy.”

“N-No way I can do that, man...”

Feeling conflicted about the fact that the first person in his life to gift him flowers was a man, Ryutarou nevertheless accepted the bouquet with a grimace. A second later, the bouquet activated. Apparently it wasn’t actually made of flowers, but ore that had been shaped to look like flowers. Once the artifact’s transformation was complete, it looked like a long cylindrical object with spikes sticking out of it.

“...Is this a nail bat?”

Nail bats were the preferred weapons of gangsters everywhere. Hajime gave Ryutarou a thumbs-up and said, “I couldn’t think of any better weapon for you.”

“Like hell you couldn’t! I’m no delinquent!” Ryutarou screamed as he tossed the nail bat to the floor. The moment it left its hands, it transformed back into a

bouquet. A lot of engineering had gone into making something this pointless.

“I use gauntlets! Now give mine back!” Ryutarou shouted.

“And here I thought you’d like my gift...” Hajime grumbled as he brought out Ryutarou’s gauntlets.

“Yeah, now these feel natural.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ryutarou quickly strapped on his beloved gauntlets. He punched them together, getting a feel for them.

“Ah, hold on, you moron! Don’t just go around messing with them before I’ve finished my explanation!”

“Huh? What’s the big...”

Hajime stepped forward and grabbed Ryutarou’s arms. He then pointed Ryutarou’s hands backward, toward the wall. A second later, the fist part of the gauntlets shot out and smashed through the workshop’s walls. They kept going at unbelievable speed, disappearing into the forest.

“Damn, that was close. If you slam them together, you activate the rocket punch. Be careful, you moron.”

“You’re the moron heeeeeeeeeere!” Ryutarou exclaimed as he ran off into the forest, chasing after the detached fists of his gauntlets.

“I designed them to come back and reconnect with your gauntlets so you don’t have to chase them... Well, whatever,” Hajime shrugged his shoulders, then looked over at Suzu, who was surreptitiously trying to flee the workshop.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Eek!?”

Hajime grinned happily and handed the timid Suzu something.

“U-Umm, Nagumo-kun, what is this?”

“Your old artifact. I tried upgrading it, but it was so shit that it broke.”

“How could youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!?”

The bracelet she’d been given by the king had been reduced to nothing but

junk. Hajime then pulled out her new artifact, which ended up being a leek-shaped object. Hajime had thought it would suit Suzu's hairstyle, but when he actually saw her hold it he muttered "No, forget it. You can't ever be like her."

Next, he brought out a giant stuffed animal which was actually a golem, because he wanted to see someone in their party class change into puppetmaster. But not only was Suzu unable to control it, it went berserk and started flinging her around, so he discarded the golem as defective as well. After numerous failed attempts, Hajime finally said, "Dammit, none of these work! I need to rethink my strategy from the ground up!"

He then shooed everyone out of his workshop and got back to work.

The setting sun illuminated Kouki and the others as they walked back to Verbergen, crows mocking them as they went. Looking completely defeated, Suzu muttered, "Nagumo-kun's crazy. He's a mad Synergist."

No one voiced any objections to that description.

A Hot Night in Verbergen

"Why!? How!? How did this happen!?"

She couldn't believe it. Tears spilled from her eyes. She'd trusted in them, believed they were family. She thought they'd be allies forever, but now they'd betrayed her.

"Hmph... Why, you ask? How laughable."

"I'm surprised you never realized. I thought even a moron would be able to figure it out."

"I'm amazed. You make it sound as though we betrayed you. But we were never your allies to begin with, so there was nothing to betray."

Laughter roared through the woods. Bunny ears waved back and forth.

"What...? You were after me from the very beginning? But didn't you give me your blessing!? Was that all a lie!?"

"Fool. Those were our true feelings."

“Then why!?”

“Isn’t it obvious, fool?”

A group of rabbitmen roared in unison, “We’re jealous that you get to sleep with the boss!”

Their shout caused the streetlamps of Verbergen to flicker. The nearby residents wanted dearly to shout at the rabbitmen to be quiet, but considering the nature of the conversation taking place, they found it hard to butt in. Naturally, the rabbitmen, or rather rabbitwomen, causing such a ruckus were members of the one clan known as the biggest troublemakers in Haltina, the terrifying Haulia.

“Come on, Lana-san! You can’t just shout that in public! You’re embarrassing me, ehehe!”

The girl who was blushing and fidgeting as she faced down the group of Haulia girls was, of course, none other than Shea.

“Grr, I can’t stand it! You look so damn happy, you fucking cute rabbit!”

“You’re just Shea! Just fucking Shea! I’m older than you, but I couldn’t get anywhere!”

“Shea-neesan... won’t you share some of your joy with your younger sisters?”

The three girls who’d spoken were Lana, Mina, and Nea, the three strongest women of the. Behind Shea stood their revered boss, Hajime. He awkwardly scratched his head and averted his gaze.

How exactly had things ended up like this? The cause was the fact that Hajime had officially accepted Shea as his girlfriend. Once they’d become a couple, Shea had naturally wanted to do the same things Yue did with Hajime. And, as a result, they’d decided to spend their first night. Being as well versed in espionage as they were, the Haulia had learned of that almost right away. While the men of the Haulia clan had found that a joyous occasion worth celebrating, the girls had burned with jealousy and decided to take matters into their own hands.

“Boss! You have to spend the night with all of us tonight! Take advantage of

your bunny girl harem!”

“Yeah, hell no,” Hajime rejected Lana’s proposal and shot her with a rubber bullet.

“Why not, Boss!? What’s the difference between one rabbit and a dozen!?”

“A lot, moron,” Hajime replied as he hit Mina with his hypodermic needle gun.

“Boss! Don’t you want a threesome with Shea’s sisters!?”

“Where the hell’d you learn words like threesome, Nea!? You’re barely 10! That’d be a crime!”

“As long as we love each other, age is just a number! And I love you, Boss, so it’s perfectly legal!”

“GO HOME!”

Nea puckered her lips and leaped toward Hajime, but he simply grabbed her by the face and tossed her in the general direction of the Haulia village.

“Hey, Cam! I know you’re here! You’re their leader, aren’t you? Do something about them!”

Cam dropped down from a nearby tree with the grace of a ninja. Then, he turned to Hajime and said flatly, “My apologies, Boss, but there is no force in this world than a group of determined women!”

As pathetic as it was, the finality in Cam’s voice made it clear he wouldn’t budge. Having just witnessed Lana, Mina, and Nea’s attempts, Hajime had no choice but to hesitantly agree. While he was arguing with Cam, more women desperate to interrupt Hajime and Shea’s hot and steamy night appeared.

“Ugh, now that it’s come to this, our only option is to eliminate all obstacles...”

It was hard to tell if Shea just intended to knock them out or eliminate them forever.

“Uh, at this point, I’m not really in the mood...”

At that, Shea’s ears and tail bristled. If she didn’t do something soon, her

precious first night with Hajime would be ruined. The moment she curled her hands into fists though, she was interrupted by a voice from behind.

“Hmph... Are those rabbits bothering you?”

“Yue-san!”

Yue was standing atop a nearby tree, striking a strange pose. She looked confidently down at Hajime and Shea, then somersaulted down in front of them. After that, she turned toward the bunny girls and turned to Shea and gave her a thumbs-up.

“Leave this place to me!”

“Yue. What the hell are you—”

“Yue-san! Thank you so much!”

Using her polished martial skills, Shea tripped Hajime with a leg sweep. He was too surprised to react, and before he could even gather his thoughts, Shea carried him in her arms and dashed away.

“Hajime-san’s miiiiiiiiine!” she shouted as she vanished from sight. Or rather, everyone could have sworn she did even though she actually didn’t. Lana and the others attempted to give chase, but were intercepted by Yue.

“Heavensfall.”

“Fugyaaaaaah!?”

All of the rabbitmen were forced to the ground.

“Ngh, the first wife is as strong as we expected! What a formidable foe!”

“Don’t give up, girls! If you give up here, you’ll never be able to make Boss yours by forcing yourself onto him!”

The girls struggled as hard as they could, their bodies trembling as they attempted to overcome Yue’s Heavensfall. Their efforts would have appeared valiant, were it not for the fact that their bloodshot eyes were enough to terrify anyone present. To everyone’s surprise, their love indeed managed to call forth a miracle.

A barrage of silver feathers appeared out of nowhere, sweeping away the

oppressive gravity. Yue looked up suspiciously and saw a pair of girls striking power rangers poses atop yet another tree. Kaori and Tio. She gave the two of them her most disapproving glare yet.

“What do you want, pervert dragon and Kaoridiot?”

The two answered immediately.

“We heard that we could get Hajime-kun to bed us if we just push hard enough!”

“And thus we decided to make Master ours!”

Shock and awe was Kaori’s specialty, after all, so she’d decided to team up with the rabbits and overpower Hajime with speed and power. The group of rabbit girls roused themselves with a roar, causing all nearby residents to shut their windows.

“Do you really want Hajime that badly?”

Kaori, Tio, and the rabbit girls bared their weapons at Yue, making their answer clear.

“Very well. Then come. If you want Hajime, you’ll have to pry him from my cold, dead hands!”

That would, of course, be impossible, since Yue was nigh immortal. Yue spread her arms wide, then took a martial arts stance. A moment later, all of the nearby buildings were enveloped in glimmering barriers while dark clouds gathered in the sky. Lightning crackled and the wind howled as darkness darker than night enveloped Verbergen. Yue’s eyes glowed a deep crimson as golden mana flowed from her body. Kaori and the others gulped.

“So this is what the first wife is like... when she gets serious...”

“She’s a monster.”

Such power! Such ferocity!

“All you need is courage, girls! Stand fast, for the sake of your dream!”

The pressure bearing down on the rabbit girls lightened. They looked up and saw Kaori’s silver wings glimmering in the darkness.

“Believe in yourselves!”

Right now, Kaori looked like a brave hero facing down the demon lord.

“Hmph... Trials are meant to be overcome. Young ones, hold fast. Now is the time to put your lives on the line!” Tio’s voice echoed through the city, her calm demeanor reassuring the bunny girls. Her courage in the face of overwhelming might gave them hope. If Kaori was the hero, then Tio was the wise sage who aided the hero’s fight.

The bunny girls rose to their feet with renewed determination. Thanks to Kaori and Tio, they now had the courage to butt into the affairs of others, much like Kaori and Tio themselves.

“Let’s go, girls! Chaaarge!”

At Kaori’s command, the bunny girls rushed forward.

“Die, fools,” Yue stated as she held out her hand, which made lightning rain down upon them. Yue would not let anyone interfere with her best friend’s first night.

Irritated by the horrible din, Shizuku walked out five minutes later and gave everyone involved such a scolding that they all fell meekly in line. Soon after, rumors began to spread that the black-haired swordswoman was the strongest out of all the people in Hajime’s party.

Arifureta Magic Academy: the Four Bombs of the Academy’s Club Recruitment Efforts

One day after school, a few days after the entrance ceremony, each club was hard at work trying to recruit new members.

“Now then, Myu. I know you said you didn’t know what club you wanted to join, but are there any you’re interested in?” Hajime asked as he held the hand of his beloved daughter, who’d just enrolled in the academy’s elementary division, and walked her around the club recruitment grounds. Participation in a club activity was mandatory, and Myu wasn’t exempt from that rule.

Naturally, Myu adored Hajime and thus had no interest in any club other than

the one her father was in. But unfortunately, Hajime's Synergist club was only open to those who possessed the job of Synergist, meaning Myu couldn't join. Though he was president of the club, even he didn't have the power to bend the rules for his beloved daughter. And even if he did, letting Myu in would set a precedent to allow the academy's four most troublesome girls into the club as well. For that reason, Hajime was touring the different clubs with Myu, looking for something she might like.

However, the moment Hajime asked Myu that question, whispers of "How precious..." leaked out from the ceiling, behind a nearby trashcan, inside a locker, and underneath a shelf.

"I want to join your club, Daddy."

It seemed Myu had yet to come to terms with the truth. She looked pleadingly up at Hajime, using her ultimate skill, puppy dog eyes. Despite taking massive damage, Hajime held fast.

"I'm sorry, Myu. But the rules say you can't."

"Grr... Aren't there any loopholes?"

Hajime hadn't expected to hear such a big word out a child's mouth. But thinking about it, Myu's attitude was the same as his, so it was probably his fault she knew it.

"I'm sorry I'm such a failure of a dad."

Hajime looked off into the distance, reflecting on his actions. In the end, Hajime still managed to convince Myu to at least check out a few of the other clubs. The trash can, shelf, and locker that had whispered earlier followed him wherever he went. Hajime could also hear scuffling coming from within the ceiling. After a few seconds, even these pathetic disguises were dropped.

"Hajime-kun, Myu-chan! What a coincidence, running into you here!" Kaori appeared from within the trash can. Surprised, Myu jumped into Hajime's arms with a yelp.

"How strange, Kaori. When did you start living in a trash can?"

"Hey, hey, Myu-chan! Why don't you try out my rescue club?"

“Don’t just ignore me.”

Kaori pointedly ignored Hajime and squatted down to Myu’s eye level. She smiled kindly and started talking about all of her club’s good points.

“U-Umm, Kaori-oneechan, I get it already... I’ll look at your club...”

“Really!? I’m so happy, Myu-chan! I’m sure you’ll love it!”

“Kaori, this is pathetic. You’re being pitied by a little girl.”

However, Kaori was too busy muttering “Once I get Myu-chan to call me Mommy, I’ll be Hajime-kun’s wife! Fufufu,” to notice Myu’s forced smile. The moment Kaori entered the rescue club’s clubroom, all of the other members grimaced. The last thing they wanted to see was their club president. However, when they saw Myu trailing behind her, their frowns turned upside down in a flash.

“Kaori-oneechan, what does the rescue club do?”

Kaori smiled and said, “Vice-president!”

“Hello, I’m the vice-president, Ayako Tsuji. Since our president is never here, I’ll explain what the club does, Myu-chan.”

Naturally, the reason the rescue club’s president had no idea what her club did was because she was too busy chasing romance. According to the diligent Ayako, the rescue club literally practiced how to rescue people, and researched ways to improve healing magic.

“But I can’t use magic...”

The moment Myu muttered that, Kaori sidled up to her.

“That’s fine! Most of our rescue activities don’t involve magic! How about trying it for yourself!? Hajime-kun, we need a test subject, so strip!”

“Come again?”

“We can’t rescue you if you’re clothed! That’s just common sense! Now strip! Myu-chan needs a test subject, so take your clothes off and lie down on that bed! Hurry up!”

Kaori wasn’t even bothering to hide her lust. It was hard to imagine just what

kind of rescue operations she was trying to teach Myu here. Hajime turned to vice-president Ayako. Blushing bright red, Ayako firmly shook her head, indicating that stripping was not a necessary part of rescuing someone. Kaori was just spouting nonsense. As she drew closer to Hajime, glowing silver armor attached itself to her, making it clear she was willing to use force to keep Hajime here.

Terrified, Myu clung to Hajime. But before he could do anything, he was saved by an unexpected visitor.

“Eat my hammer of justice!” Shea exclaimed as she crashed through the ceiling and fell toward Kaori. Caught completely by surprise, Kaori was unable to defend against Shea’s massive hammer and was sent flying straight through the club room’s window.

“Phew... That was close! But you’re safe now that I’m here!” Shea said as she struck a pose and looked down at Myu. Like Kaori, she was also trying to win Myu over. She’d only removed Kaori because she wanted to look cool in front of Myu and be called Mommy.

“Myu-chan!”

“Y-Yes!?”

“Do you desire power?”

Smiling, Shea held a hand out to Myu. So what if she was a child or a dagon? Shea was just a mere rabbitgirl, but she too had cut open her own path using force. Myu glanced over at Hajime, then turned back to Shea and her passionate gaze.

“I do! I want power!” Myu said innocently.

“Very well. Then I shall grant it to you! Come, follow me!”

For some reason, Shea was imitating Tio’s style of speech. However, it succeeded in getting Myu excited, and she happily followed behind Shea. Shea walked out of the room, completely unconcerned about the fact that she’d just smashed it to pieces.

“Sorry. I’ll try and repair everything that can be repaired.”

“Ahaha... Thanks, Nagumo-kun. If possible, I’d like it if you could repair the president’s brain too...”

“That impossible.”

All of the club members smiled ruefully. Once he was done repairing the rescue club’s room, Hajime hurried over to the CQC club that Shea managed.

“President Shea! Once more, please!”

“Bring it on!”

In the middle of a huge ring, Shea was toying with a group of muscular men. Though they came at her in droves, she easily made short work of all of them. For some reason, though, every time one was thrown out of the ring, he would scream in ecstasy.

“D-Daddy, I don’t think I can do this...”

Myu had been watching the CQC club’s activities from a corner of the room. The moment Hajime walked in, she ran over to him, tears in her eyes. It was obvious Shea’s display of might had completely shattered Myu’s will to fight.

“Don’t worry, Myu. You don’t have to turn into a berserker like her to become strong.”

The two of them hurried out of the room. Behind them, they could hear the sounds of Shea destroying her club members, mingled with the sounds of her club members moaning in pleasure. *It’s gonna be a long time to find a club Myu likes, huh?* Hajime thought idly to himself as he walked down the halls.

“Hmph... Searching for a club?” Yue asked as she appeared from underneath a nearby cardboard box. Hajime smiled and ignored Yue completely. Shocked, Yue jogged after him.

“H-Hajime! Why did you ignore me!?”

“Yue-sensei, please enlighten us as to what the club you advise does.”

“We write poems praising Hajime all day and read them aloud.”

“And that’s why I’m ignoring you.”

Incidentally, the members of the club were all abnormal students who really

wanted to see Hajime and Yue have an illicit student-teacher affair. In other words, they were fanatics who only recognized the HajimeXyue ship. Naturally, Hajime had no intention of putting his daughter in the care of such unhinged people. Yue fell to all fours, and her club members started consoling her.

“Master, wonderful timing. I implore you, convince dear Myu to join my masochism—”

“Get out of here, perverted dragon.”

Hajime grabbed the perverted chairman by the face and stuffed her back into the locker she came out of. Then, he slammed the locker door shut, transmuted it to keep it locked forever, and threw the locker out a nearby window. Hopefully a passing janitor would burn the locker to a crisp using advanced-class fire magic.

“Daddy, that was the chairman just now...”

“Don’t worry about it, Myu. There are some things you’re better off not knowing about.”

“O-Okay...”

Furthermore, the masochism club wasn’t even an official club. It was just a room the chairman had appropriated by abusing her authority. None of the objects stored in that room were ones a normal, healthy young girl should ever see. After a few more minutes of walking, they finally arrived at the club room Hajime had been looking for. The string of earlier ordeals had tired him out.

“Daddy, what’s this?”

“This is the cooking club. I think you’ll like it.”

Myu seemed to already have an interest in cooking, as her eyes lit up when she heard those words. Hajime knocked, then entered the club room.

“Mind if we watch?”

“Huh? N-Nagumo!?”

The club president stiffened up the moment she saw Hajime. Then, she started smoothing out her clothes and straightening her hair.

“Yo, Sonobe. Can you show my daughter what your club does?”

“Y-You mean Myu-chan? We’d love to have more club members, so I’d be glad to, but...” Yuka trailed off, wondering why Hajime would pick her club of all things.

“It’s a standard club, and it seems like the kind of thing girls would like. Personally, I want her to join a club like this one.”

“Y-You do?”

Naturally, Hajime was praising the club and not Yuka herself, but that didn’t stop Yuuka from blushing anyway. Her club members all grinned at her. Hajime ignored her strange behavior and squatted down in front of Myu.

“By the way, Sonobe here’s also president of the sewing club next door, so she can teach you anything about household chores.”

“Y-You’re praising me too much Nagumo! Sheesh!”

Despite her words, Yuuka’s blush deepened, as did the grins of her club members.

“Plus, she’s part of the public morals committee, so she’s strong too. In fact, she’s as popular as student president Yaegashi. You could learn a lot from her.”

“Oooh, she sounds amazing in a normal way!”

Myu emphasized the “in a normal way” bit, but Yuka didn’t mind. She was too busy blushing to notice anyway. It was indeed true that Yuka was popular, especially among the female students. All the members of both the cooking and sewing clubs were enamored with her as well, so naturally, they were glad when Hajime praised her so much.

“W-Well we were just about to start baking cookies, so why not help us, Myu-chan? You can give them to Nagumo... I-I mean Daddy.”

“Okay!”

There was a good atmosphere going, and the club members all treated Myu kindly. Yuka helped Myu put an apron on while Hajime watched from the sidelines.

Naturally, once the school's four bombs heard that Myu had joined the cooking club, they all rushed to see what was going on. And, as a result, Yuka was put on their watchlist of people close to Hajime they needed to worry about.

Floating Hot Springs Panic

Fernir gently sailed through the sky. This high up, there were no obstacles to obstruct it, or enemies to attack it. Even if there were monsters inhabiting the sky, Fernir was more than equipped to handle them. Hajime had not only upgraded its weapons with evolution magic, but he'd also strengthened the ship's hull. Furthermore, there were thousands of cannons and missile launchers positioned strategically all around the ship. There was nowhere in Tortus safer than Fernir.

"Sho coooooozy."

"H-Hold on, Suzu! You shouldn't do that!"

Right now, all of Fernir's passengers were enjoying the onboard hot springs that Hajime had recently installed. In fact, Suzu was enjoying the hot springs so much that she'd nearly submerged herself into them. She then floated to the surface, exposing her naked body to the elements. Kaori, on the other hand, sat down leisurely in the tub and said, "Now now, Shizuku-chan. We're all girls here, so it's fine."

"You might be right, but still..."

"She's right, Shizuku-san. It feels so good. Come on, join us."

"We're talking about showing proper modesty here, Shea. Whether or not it feels good is irrelevant."

"Shizuku, there is no need to be so small-minded. Look at how vast this blue sky is."

"That's even more irrelevant!"

"Shizuku, curse you for having such an erotic body."

"Can we please get back on topic!? And stop saying stuff like that!" Shizuku

said as she hugged herself to hide her body from Yue's lecherous gaze. Blushing, she shot a furtive glance behind her. There was only a single wall, past which stretched the vast blue sky.

"Yue, you shouldn't talk so loud. The bath is in open-air mode, so people outside can hear us."

"Huh!?"

Upon hearing that, Shizuku blushed even brighter and hugged herself tighter. Though her arms and legs were tightly muscled from all of her training, her body still possessed very feminine curves, which Yue stared at intently.

"You can talk about Yaegashi if you want, but you better not talk about your own bodies. If these other two guys hear anything, I'll be forced to kill them."

"Mmm... Okay."

"Hey! You can't talk about me either! I demand better treatment than this!"

Naturally, Hajime ignored Shizuku's protests. The men's bath, which was separated by a single wall, suddenly grew noisy due to the sounds of splashing. It sounded as though two guys were trying to run away from a third. As Hajime had put the bath in open-air mode, the people soaking in the hot springs could enjoy seeing the sky all around them, both above and below. The bath itself was made to look as natural as possible too. Furthermore, Hajime had used evolution magic to give the bathwater restorative properties.

It was hardly surprising that the girls found it so relaxing. As always, the master craftsman had spared no expense in making it as luxurious as possible.

"Though I must say, it is quite impressive that you managed to fashion such a bath, Master. Are baths of this nature popular in your homeland?"

Hajime had done a wonderful job of modeling a Japanese-style bath. Not only was the tub made of real rock, but there was also even a small bamboo thicket growing in the bathhouse. There was also a small waterfall that circulated the water through a magic filter that removed all impurities. Since it was afternoon, Hajime had put it in open-air mode, but there was also an indoor mode with soft lighting for when it was night.

“I wouldn’t say all the baths in Japan are like this, but most are. I modeled this one after my favorite hot springs back on Earth.”

“Oho. So you are a fan of hot springs?” Tio asked, seemingly glad to have learned another thing about Hajime. However, Hajime waited a few moments before responding.

“I think it’s more accurate to say the Nagumo family is.”

“You mean to say your parents?”

“Yeah. All of us love hot springs, especially in winter. My parents are pretty busy most of the year, so we don’t often get chances to go on vacation... but they still get time off around New Year, so it’s become kind of a tradition to go to the hot springs to celebrate it.”

Hajime’s voice was gentle, conveying just how much he cared about his parents. Yue and the others listened with rapt attention, while Shizuku and the rest reminisced about the times they spent with their own family. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Kaori finally said, “Come to think of it, I always tried inviting you to visit a shrine with me and Shizuku-chan and everyone, Hajime-kun.”

The peaceful atmosphere suddenly grew tense, mostly in the men’s side of the bath. However, Kaori didn’t notice the change in Kouki and Ryutarou and continued, “I always wondered why you never answered, but now I know it was because you were with your parents. Fufu, if I’d known that, I wouldn’t have gotten so jealous—”

“Let me just say this now,” Hajime’s cut in, his voice sounding surprisingly stiff. Kaori tilted her head quizzically, while Shizuku just looked up in resignation.

“It wasn’t that I didn’t notice Kaori. I saw your texts.”

“Huh!? Wait, if you saw them, then does that mean you just ignored me!?”

Shocked, Kaori got to her feet.

“Yep.”

“How could you, Hajime-kun!? That’s so mean!”

“Because in the one hour I spent in the hot springs, I got more than forty texts from you.”

In other words, Hajime had been terrified of responding. Kaori’s texts had been endless. “What’s wrong?” “Are you busy?” “Sorry if I’m interrupting anything, but I’d really like to hear back from you.” “Oh, still busy?” “Hm, are my texts not reaching you?” “Sorry!” “I’ll resend them!” “Nagumo-kun, Nagumo-kun!” “Where are you right now?” “Are you at home?” “If you’re home, why aren’t you replying?” “Did something happen?” “Are you okay?” “Should I come visit you?” “If you don’t say anything, I’ll start counting down!” And so on.

“Back then, I thought that countdown was the countdown to my doom.”

“I’d never do something to hurt you!”

Incidentally, Kaori had indeed tried to barge into Hajime’s house. It had only been thanks to Shizuku’s valiant efforts that Kaori had been restrained. Afterward, while Hajime had been trying to think of how to reply, Kaori had barraged him with another avalanche of texts. In the end, she’d even started leaving voice mails. When one had said, “I won’t stop until you pick up...” Hajime had been so terrified that he turned his phone off. After that, he’d focused on the hot springs and tried to forget everything else. His dad was pretty worried about him when he saw Hajime shivering even inside a hot spring, though.

“I finally managed to stop Kaori after her tenth call attempt. When I saw how many texts she’d sent you, I realized what you must have been going through.”

“Yaegashi, you really are my savior,” Hajime said, feeling truly grateful to Shizuku. It was thanks to her that Kaori’s text spam had stopped in the hundreds instead of the thousands.

“Kaoridiot, you’re a total stalker.”

“Kaori-san, even I’m a little creeped out by that.”

“Kaori, not even I am capable of defending such actions.”

“Ugh... I-I’m sorry. I just really wanted to spend some time with Hajime-kun,” Kaori replied as she sunk into the bathtub, trying to hide from everyone’s

piercing gazes.

“Well, I guess it’s partly my fault for not having the balls to reply until the next day. Sorry.”

“Th-Thank goodness you understand. And in the end, we were able to see each other at the shrine.”

“Yeah. Even though the shrine was so packed that you could barely see ten feet in front of you, you somehow spotted me in the crowd and weaved your way toward me. I nearly passed out when I saw you.”

“.....” Kaori averted her gaze from the other girls. She was beginning to realize that all of the memories with Hajime she looked back on fondly, he seemed to consider scary. Yue gently walked over to Kaori and patted her shoulder.

“Yue?”

“Kaori. Rest easy. Hajime might get terrified when he thinks of you and hot springs, but whenever he thinks of me and hot springs, he’ll remember the night we first slept together.”

“.....” Yue’s voice was so bold that Shizuku and Suzu had to hide their faces inside the water. On the other hand, Kouki and Ryutarou nearly collapsed from shock in the men’s bath.

“A-And why exactly should I rest easy because of that? Hmmm?”

“Because I’ve managed to cover up your bad memories with good ones, which means you’re no longer needed. You can leave now, Kaori.”

“Disintegrate!”

“Huh!?”

Unable to take Yue’s gleeful taunting, Kaori unleashed her disintegration powers. Though Yue managed to dodge the barrage of deadly feathers, the wall behind her was not so lucky. Kaori’s feathers obliterated it instantly, destroying the only partition between the men’s and women’s bath. Though Hajime had created the wall out of highly sturdy material, it still stood no chance against Kaori’s full might. With the wall gone, water from the women’s bath rushed into

the men's bath.

"Huh? Wait, noooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Shizuku's choice to retreat to the wall backfired on her, and she was sucked toward the men's bath. Realizing she'd made a colossal mistake, Kaori rushed forward to save Shizuku. At the same time, she heard two muffled yells from the men's bath.

"Waaah, Kaori, you idiot! Why did you use disintegration magic inside!?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Shizuku leaned back against a boulder while Kaori hugged her tight. It almost looked like Kaori was pressing Shizuku up against the wall for a confession. Unfortunately, that meant exposing her naked body for all to see. Kouki and Ryutarou lay on the ground, unconscious, while Hajime's lips twitched. While Shizuku was protected thanks to Kaori, she could still see into the men's bath. She looked down toward it and—

"ASGOLigjaeglkjhgleqwtiuhaksjfhltiu !"

Even after things had settled down, Shizuku hid behind her ponytail for the next few hours. And for quite some time after, she couldn't look Hajime in the eyes

Arifureta Fairy Tales: Momotarou

Long ago, an old couple lived together. Every morning, the old man would go to the mountains for a walk, while the old woman went to the river to do the laundry. Today was no exception, and the two finished their respective tasks without incident. Naturally, neither of them saw a genetically modified oversized peach floating down the river or anything. However—

"Dear! Look, in front of the house!"

Straining his eyes, the old man spotted something in front of his house. He and his wife rushed over and found an adorable baby sleeping inside a basket that had been left on their front door. They both believed the child to be a blessing sent by God... or would have, if they were fools. No, they knew the

child had likely been abandoned by their adventure-loving daughter who was too enamored with adventuring to take care of a baby. As a way of apology, their daughter had also left a peach, the couple's favorite fruit, in the basket.

"Now this is quite a problem... I know we said we wanted to see our grandchild soon, but not like this. We don't even know the poor babe's name."

"Indeed... Well, our daughter left us a peach in the basket as well, so why not call him Momotarou?"

"Dear, you are a genius! I've fallen in love with you all over again!"

"Oh, you're making me blush!"

The airheaded couple went inside and decided to raise the young boy. Later on, he would come to resent his overly simplistic name, but otherwise, he grew up healthy and strong.

Finally, Momotarou reached his seventeenth birthday. Ignoring the stares he constantly felt on him whenever he went outside, he begged his grandfather for a present.

"Gramps, I want transmuting ingredients!"

"We ain't rich enough to afford those!"

That was hardly a surprise. After all, the old man spent every day going on walks in the mountain instead of actually working. Momotarou's household was just barely self-sufficient, and every winter they worried about whether or not they would survive to see spring. The people who seemed to follow Momotarou wherever he went often shared their food with him in the winter, which was the only reason he and his family had made it this far. It was for this reason that Momotarou was unable to report his stalkers to the proper authorities.

However, this meant he was forced to live a life stalked by unknown stares, with no money to practice his beloved transmutation. Momotarou was sick of this lifestyle. But one day, a certain rumor reached his ears. Apparently, there lived a very dangerous demon on the mythical island of demons. Said demon reportedly loved gold and silver and forced all the people around him to bring him those precious metals as tribute. Knowing that the demon had such a huge stash, Momotarou came up with the perfect plan.

“Alright, let’s just kill him and take his treasure.”

Poverty truly changed people. Momotarou swiftly crafted a revolver out of the few metals he’d managed to scavenge from the nearby mountain, as well as a few hand grenades. He fashioned a few other pieces of equipment and set out on his journey to escape poverty. As he left the house, he was intercepted by a stranger.

“Momotarou-kun, Momotarou-kun! Hello, I’m a talking pheasant! Please take me on your journey and marry me forever!”

Momotarou wasted one of his precious bullets shooting this “pheasant.” While she did have wings, those wings were silver, and she looked far more human than animal. The pheasant, which he’d decided to mentally call peasant, let out an erotic moan and fell to the ground. However, she got right back up and shouted, “Why did you shoot me!?”

“Because you’re the one who’s been stalking me,” Momotarou said, speaking the truth. Peasant rubbed her swollen forehead and desperately tried to win Momotarou’s favor.

“I promise I’ll be useful! Look, I can disintegrate things!” Peasant claimed as it unleashed a blinding silver light, and Momotarou’s grandfather’s precious hiking tools were turned to dust. His grandfather let out a cry of despair, which for some reason made Momotarou’s mood improve.

“Alright, fine. I owe you for giving me food anyway...Thanks for that.”

Seeing his blushing face was enough to cause Peasant to get a nosebleed. Smiling radiantly as blood poured from her nostrils, Peasant followed Momotarou on his quest to slay a demon for material gain. After they had been traveling for a while, the pair ran into a wild rabbit.

“Momotarou-san, Momotarou-san! Please give me one of the warhammers at your waist!”

“This is totally ruining the story. I’m supposed to run into a monkey next, not a rabbit.”

“Please understand, it’s difficult to get the casting right every time!”

Persuaded by the rabbit's forceful argument, Momotarou sighed and nodded. He did his best to ignore the monkey he saw twitching behind the rabbit. It was obvious she'd beaten him half to death, considering there was blood dripping from her knuckles. But for Momotarou, ignorance was bliss.

"Violent bunny girls are in right now! Momotarou-san, I'll send all of your enemies flying to the moon!"

It seemed this extremely violent bunny wished to join Momotarou's party.

"Uh, sure. Do whatever you want, Murderer."

And so, Murderer joined the party. Momotarou continued his journey, listening to Peasant and Murderer bicker over who would become his first wife. Before long, they ran into yet another person.

"Please call me a dog!"

Momotarou tried to escape from the pervert, but she was too fast for him. Once she'd caught back up, she pulled out a dilapidated looking box and attempted a take two. She sat inside the box, which had the words "Please adopt me" scrawled onto its side and looked up at Momotarou like a puppy.

"Momotarou-dono, Momotarou-dono... Sorry, I mean Master. Please give me the slave collar hanging from your belt!"

Momotarou wasted the second of his six precious bullets on the dog, but she only squealed in pleasure as she was struck. Incidentally, he did not actually own a slave collar.

"Fear not! If you do not possess one, I can give you one of—"

Seeing as he'd failed to vanquish the parasite, Momotarou used up a third shot. However, his attempt to eliminate her only made her more aroused. Seeing her panting in joy, he lost confidence in his own equipment. *Will I really be able to kill a demon with this?*

And so, the stalker known as Peasant, the violent berserker known as Murderer, and the pervert known as Dog all became comrades. They advanced toward the island, burying any enemies they encountered with their overwhelming strength. The bright future Momotarou was fighting for would

soon be in his grasp. Before long, they reached the island. It was covered in dark clouds, with the only illumination coming from occasional flashes of lightning. For a time, they progressed unimpeded through it. But eventually, they met someone.

“Hm? Has someone else come?”

As the demon slowly rose from her bed, Momotarou’s heart was struck by lightning. Metaphorical lightning, of course. However, that was only natural. After all, the demon was so beautiful that he couldn’t help but be smitten. Her flowing golden hair, glowing crimson eyes, and perfect features were the ultimate combination of beauty and seductiveness. For a demon, she was unbelievably cute! In truth, the demon had never asked anyone for tribute. People had just started offering it to her after seeing how beautiful she was. At first, she had rejected the gifts, but the demon was a NEET at heart, so in order to support her lifestyle of never leaving her house, she’d decided to start letting people leave offerings at her front door. Before she knew it, though, her treasure horde had grown massive.

Incidentally, quite a few people had tried to force themselves onto the cute demon girl, but she was strong enough to have easily destroyed anyone foolish enough to try. Thinking another band of ruffians had come to try and rape her, the demon languidly turned her gaze onto the intruders.

“Ah!? Y-You’re...”

“Momotarou.”

This time it was the demon whose heart was struck by metaphorical lightning. Momotarou and the demon gazed into each other’s eyes. Peasant, Murderer, and Dog all realized that they couldn’t allow the two to grow any closer. If they did, Momotarou’s heart would be stolen right out from under their noses! The three of them assaulted the demon, intent on killing her. However, the demon raised a finger that made literal lightning strike down on the three animals.

“Momotarou-san, I’ll give you everything I own, so please marry me.”

And so, Momotarou-san was wed to his demon wife. The three animals continued challenging her for Momotarou’s heart, but despite their persistence, she grew fond of them and started keeping them as pets. Other nations and

tribes assaulted her for her riches, but now that Momotarou had materials to work with, he was easily able to create an armory powerful enough to annihilate any foe. After a while, the rest of the world decided to let sleeping dogs lie, and avoided their island as best as they could. And so, Momotarou lived happily ever after with his demon wife.







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Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 9

by Ryo Shirakome

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